

## All Souls' Day

The Catholic Church offers assistance for those who are sick, dying, dead, and grieving. When Catholics fall sick, anyone can pray with them. If they request communion, any communion minister you see at church can bring communion to the sick at home. Most hospitals and nursing homes have a communion minister for Catholics. If the illness is serious, a priest will go to anoint the sick. When he comes, he is usually praying that the person will get better. If the sick person wishes, the priest may also hear his or her confession.

When a Catholic is dying, the most important sacrament they can receive is communion. Whenever possible, it is best to have a priest, deacon or communion minister bring communion to the dying while the person is still able to swallow. Any lay person can lead other prayers for the dying and the dead.

Funeral customs vary from culture to culture, but the Catholic Church envisions a funeral in three stages: a wake, a mass, and a graveside service. The wake may take place in a person's home, at the funeral home, or at church. The Catholic Church recommends a scripture service, although the rosary is still quite common. Any lay person may lead the wake service.

The funeral mass is our most important prayer for the dead. During the mass we offer the soul of the deceased person to God.

The third stage is at the cemetery. We offer a brief service of prayers and scriptures. Normally a priest or deacon leads that service, but it too may be led by a lay person.

In recent years, individual Catholic families have been abbreviating these three stages. Maybe it's a sign of our busy lives. Some families prefer to gather the mourners only once, combining the visitation with the mass. Others do not want a mass at all, even though this is something that the Catholic Church expects parishes to offer.

Many people are now choosing cremation. The Catholic Church permits it, though it still prefers burial of the body. Burial is the ancient Christian custom. Seeing the body confronts the Christian faithful with the mystery of life and death. It naturally recalls the personal story of faith, family bonds, friendship, words and deeds. The body was washed in baptism, anointed at confirmation, and nourished with communion. It is destined for future glory at the resurrection. The care we give the body expresses the dignity of the person. And burial follows the example of the final placement of Jesus' body.

Nonetheless, cremation is permitted. In that case, the ashes should be kept in a dignified vessel. That vessel should be carried with the same care we give to a coffin. The Catholic Church prefers that the ashes be buried in a public cemetery, not kept in a private home or scattered outdoors. In this way a plaque or stone can be put into place, and future generations can pay their respects to the remains of the person who died.

On this All Souls' Day, as we mourn those we have loved and lost, we pray that God will forgive their sins and lead them to eternal life. Let us strive to live in a way that respects the life we received, so that we may return it as a pleasing sacrifice to God when we die.