

The funeral rites of the Catholic Church offer consolation to those who mourn the loss of one they love. They reaffirm our faith in Jesus Christ, in his resurrection, and in his promise that the faithful will rise with him for eternity.

The Catholic Church envisions the funeral rites in three stages: a vigil service, a funeral mass, and the committal. For wakes, you usually pay respects to the deceased at a funeral home and pray the rosary. We certainly may do that, but just so you know, the official liturgical book for Catholic funerals envisions this differently. It proposes a service that resembles the first part of mass, featuring scripture readings and prayers. It's called a "vigil", it may take place at a funeral home, but it may also happen in the church, where we can sing from our hymnals, use our sanctuary, and still have space for the coffin and for everyone to greet and console the family. The vigil service reaches out to all mourners, including those who may not know the rosary, but would find meaning in readings from the bible.

The anchor of the Catholic funeral rites is the mass. Some families ask not to have mass – for example, if a number of them are not Catholic, would not know the responses and postures, or would not be coming to communion. We may celebrate a funeral in church without mass, again using scripture readings and prayers without communion, but normally we celebrate the eucharist; the mass is the most appropriate way to honor the faith of a deceased Catholic. Some people want to omit the wake service and the mass and just go to the cemetery. We can, but I do not advise it. The 3-stage observance for Catholic funerals is not just a nice tradition; it is a proven way to help mourners through the initial phase of grief.

The final stage of our funeral rites takes place at the cemetery. Usually we gather, say some prayers and leave, and then workers lower the coffin into the earth. But just so you know, a Catholic funeral promotes another option. We don't have to, but we may lower the coffin while we are there, during our prayers, to show our complete care for the deceased and to announce our firm belief that the grave is powerless against the resurrection of Christ.

For many years the Catholic Church did not approve of cremation, but now we accept it. We may conduct the funeral rites in church with the ashes present. However, the Catholic Church prefers that the ashes then be placed in a cemetery, not on a shelf at home or scattered to the winds. We have a deep respect for the body, and burial in a public place with a marker allows future generations to give that same respect to the one who has died.

At the end of his First Letter to the Thessalonians, Saint Paul reminds the community that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. Even so, he says to his Christian brothers and sisters, "you are not in darkness for that day to overtake you like a thief. You are children of the light and children of the day." When we say farewell to our Christian brothers and sisters, we use ancient rituals and prayers that stabilize our faith, announce it to others, and escort our beloved dead to a place where perpetual light will shine upon them.