

Past Meets Present: How Catholic Traditional Funerals Fulfill or Miss the Needs of Contemporary Society

Paul Turner

When the Second Vatican Council authorized revisions to the Catholic Church's funeral rites, its fathers aimed to achieve the goal "that the faithful should easily understand the sacramental signs... that bear a resemblance to the sacraments."¹ Specifically, "The rite for the burial of the dead should express more clearly the paschal character of Christian death, and should correspond more closely to the circumstances and traditions found in various regions. This holds good also for the liturgical color to be used."² Furthermore, "The rite for the burial of infants is to be revised, and a special Mass for the occasion should be provided."³

At once, one observes two overarching themes of the council: first, the centrality of the paschal mystery, which enriches a simpler meditation on the cross of Christ and embraces his resurrection and second coming; second, the pastoral care of the faithful, here at a time of loss, with special concern for regional customs and for those who suffer the death of an infant.

At a distance of over fifty years, a review of the *Order of Christian Funerals* (OCF) uncovers both success and struggle. Even though the postconciliar funeral rite offered new approaches to obsequies, it now feels traditional because of its widespread usage for more than a generation. The traditional postconciliar funeral still fulfills the needs of people in grief.

Some of the liturgical books have undergone second and third editions since their first release after the council, but not the OCF. However, even though the ritual book has not changed, society has changed in those fifty years.⁴

The vernacular publications of the OCF started from the Vatican's typical edition, but they came with a generous permission for conferences of bishops

¹ *Sacrosanctum concilium* 59-60. https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19631204_sacrosanctum-concilium_en.html.

² *Ibid.*, 81.

³ *Ibid.*, 82.

⁴ This article is based on a presentation given by the author at the biennial meeting of Societas Liturgica, gathered in Durham, England, in August 2019. That presentation, in turn, is based on his book, *Light in the Darkness: Preparing Better Catholic Funerals* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2017).

around the world to make adaptations. The Introduction to the *Ordo Exsequiarum* (IOE) notes, “The conference of bishops will make the arrangements appropriate to what particular needs require” (8). These include decisions pertaining to the arrangement of the rite, the replacement of formularies, the addition of different formularies, the deputation of laypersons to celebrate funerals, the omission of parts, and the determination of the color of liturgical vestments (IOE 22).

This article explores the 1989 OCF approved for use in the United States of America, along with its 1997 Appendix pertaining to cremation (OCFa). The reader will anticipate different experiences of funeral rites in other countries, based on the nature of permitted adaptations and on both sacred and secular customs that continually evolve to make meaningful the ceremonies that express the grief and hope of the local faithful.

An Overview of the Catholic Funeral Rites

A complete Catholic funeral ideally unfolds in three stages joined by two processions. The first stage usually takes place at evening in a home, funeral home or church. A procession the next morning brings the remains of the deceased to the church for the funeral mass. The second procession carries the deceased from the church to the cemetery.

The processional nature of these stages shows how the liturgy mirrors the journey of human life, one’s pilgrimage to the heavenly Jerusalem (OCF 42). It is recommended that pallbearers actually carry the coffin as a sign of respect (41), underscoring the stateliness of the ceremonies, providing personal care to the body, and showing - by the symbolic ministry of the few - the care of the many.

Regarding the principal liturgy, the OCF offers two forms: a ceremony with mass, considered the norm, and one outside mass. The OCF also permits celebrating mass after the committal of the remains of the deceased. This is especially mentioned as one option for the handling of cremated remains (OCFa 422-425).

The OCF offers other reasons for a funeral outside mass (178). For example, the liturgical calendar disallows a funeral mass on certain days such as holydays of obligation, Holy Thursday and the Easter Triduum, as well as the Sundays of Advent, Lent and Easter Time (IOE 6, The General Instruction of the Roman Missal 380). Alternatively, the celebration of mass may be impossible to arrange before committal should take place; for example, when no priest is available in a timely way. Sometimes pastoral considerations suggest that a funeral without mass better suits the circumstances; for example, if the deceased were the only Catholic member of the family.

Nonetheless, in these circumstances “a liturgy of the word is prescribed absolutely,” and a mass “in all cases must, if possible, be celebrated on another day within a reasonable time” (IOE 6). In the United States, ministers facing these circumstances would likely agree to a funeral liturgy without mass, but many do not realize that a mass should still be celebrated at another time. The simplest

solution is for the priest to designate a regularly scheduled mass in his parish for the repose of the soul of the deceased.

This threefold liturgy, linked by processions, remains the ideal in the OCF, but sweeping changes are happening to this structure in American Catholic life.

Trends in Funeral Ministry

The OCF aims to provide an anchor for funerals, but the attendant ministry to the dying, the dead, and the mourners drifts in some inexorable patterns.

For example, pastoral care is diminishing not just because of the shortage of priests, but because of revised expectations of the Catholic laity. Perhaps the former has helped foster the latter.

Regarding pastoral care before death, the postconciliar revision to the sacrament of the sick is both a success and a failure. Many Catholics now successfully understand that they may be anointed during an illness, and that the anointing does not necessarily signal the imminence of death, as extreme unction did in the past. However, the same Catholics fail to realize the appropriate actions for those who are dying. They assume that they still need to call a priest for “last rites.” Even non-Catholics commonly hold the same belief. The revised liturgical book *Pastoral Care of the Sick: Rites of Anointing and Viaticum* (PCS) has no section entitled “last rites.” The commendation of the dying may be led by any layperson; it does not require the presence of a priest (PCS 213). A priest is required for confession and anointing, but those sacraments may be celebrated earlier in the illness.

Viaticum is the preferred last sacrament (PCS 175). The sick ideally receive this final communion while they are still conscious enough to renew baptismal promises and to swallow (Code of Canon Law 922). Any extraordinary minister of holy communion has the authority to offer viaticum.⁵ But very few Catholics understand that the “last rite” the church prefers is not anointing, but viaticum, which does not absolutely require a priest for its administration.

Regarding funeral rites, pastoral care is also diminishing. The traditional three stages commonly collapse into two or even one. Often the vigil for the deceased takes place in the church a couple of hours before the funeral mass begins in the same location with no intervening procession. In cases of cremation, there may be no procession to the place of committal, much less a rite of committal, if mourners have decided to retain the ashes, rather than inter them. Mourners sometimes reduce the number of stages on principles such as expediency. Why stretch a funeral out over twenty-four hours when it can more tidily take place in about three?

Pastoral care has diminished because family members and mourners are exercising more control over the place and time of the services, and even over the ministers who lead it. Some shop for and hire out a priest they prefer, one

⁵ *Immensæ caritatis*, “On Facilitating Reception of Communion in Certain Circumstances,” <https://www.ewtn.com/catholicism/library/on-facilitating-reception-of-communion-in-certain-circumstances-2178>.

who may not be responsible for their complete pastoral care. Many priests do not forcefully object because they are overworked, their time is limited, and funerals happen on such short notice that they can rearrange their other commitments only with difficulty. If another minister leads the ceremonies, or if his own hours of service to these mourners are reduced, he may gladly opt for solutions that lower his stress.

Beyond pastoral care, other trends that affect funeral ministry pertain to the ceremonies. These reveal some disparities between the liturgical books and the actual enactment of the rites.

One persistent trend in the United States replaces the liturgical vigil for the deceased with a common recitation of the rosary. Surprising to many, the word “rosary” appears nowhere in the OCF. One often hears that the tradition of praying the rosary on the eve of a funeral came to the United States from Ireland. If a priest were to lead only the liturgical vigil without the rosary, thus being perfectly faithful to the OCF, some Catholic families may erroneously accuse him of doing it the wrong way. Still, the rosary does not happen as often as in the past. Non-Catholic mourners are unfamiliar with it; even many Catholics do not know how to pray it. The OCF’s vigil for the deceased features scripture readings that more easily provide a common point of entry to unite diverse people in prayer. The vigil can work beautifully. But it is not always celebrated partly because mourners do not know about it, and partly because many of them want only one liturgical service, not two. In such cases, they prefer to eliminate the vigil altogether.

Whatever takes place in the evening or hours before the funeral mass, the gathering now commonly features the projection of videos and the display of mementos. People seem less focused on biblical testimony about the mystery of life and death and more focused on the source of their personal grief.

Symbols remain a powerful way to mark this time of transition (OCF 38). Many mourners still send flowers, a means of providing visual and aromatic beauty that stimulates the intensity of the moment with buds that themselves will soon fade and die away.

National flags and symbols of associations may be used as decorative elements. However, these are not to be placed on or near the coffin (OCF 38). As strongly as many Americans feel about the flag, priests experience surprisingly little resistance to the Catholic tradition that only a white cloth drape the coffin for the funeral services. The cloth at once serves as an equalizer of humanity and a foreshadowing of the garment that the scriptures describe as a uniform of heaven (e.g. Rev 15:6 and 19:14).

Ever since the council, which allowed a change in the color of liturgical vestments for funerals, priests and deacons in the United States have customarily worn white for the occasion (OCF 39). This stirs up hope in eternal life, even as does the lighting of the paschal candle. Violet and black vesture are permitted, but because white garments are commonly expected, darker vestments may suggest a symbol of despair, not grief. Recently some clergy have

returned to wearing black vestments for funerals, in keeping with an earlier tradition. These customs vary from priest to priest, region to region, and country to country.

The postconciliar music for funerals has largely changed from Gregorian chant to popular hymnody. Prior to the council, the repertoire for funeral music remained the same, and the chants of the Requiem Mass were well known. Today, even though mourners may choose music from an endless array of possibilities, a standard repertoire has evolved in the United States. This include songs such as “How Great Thou Art,” “On Eagle’s Wings,” “Amazing Grace,” and “Shepherd Me, O God.” If a soloist is available, one can expect to hear Schubert’s “Ave Maria.” Some families of Irish descent request a bagpiper to conclude the service. Often a family will request songs that had been sung at the funeral of another family member. The music for funerals will reside in the memory of mourners, who, upon hearing the same songs in other contexts in later years, may find themselves reliving the grief of their loss and the hope of eternal life.

Families commonly request time for one or more of the mourners to speak about the deceased. The OCF in the United States gives this permission both at the vigil service and during the funeral mass. For example, “A member or a friend of the family may speak in remembrance of the deceased before the final commendation begins” (170). However, a more literal translation of the Latin would be this: “An Episcopal Conference may permit that, according to the custom of the place, after a period of silence, words of greeting, offered by the relatives of the deceased, may be delivered.” The OCF probably had nothing more in mind than for a mourner to turn to the assembly and say, “On behalf of our family, thank you for your presence and prayers today.” But the translation has opened a Pandora’s box of remembrances - some quite moving, others quite inappropriate. Often a funeral mass stalls into a lengthy delay as family members speak “in remembrance of the deceased” instead of “words of greeting.” The time consumed often disrupts the flow of the eucharistic service. To counter the trend, some dioceses forbid the sharing of such remembrances during mass, permitting them only at the vigil. Some parishes position the delivery of the remembrances before the mass begins. The overall trend signifies in American culture an expression of one’s right to personalization, and perhaps a woefully experienced expectation that clergy alone would fail to remember the deceased in a meaningful way.

Cremation

The Catholic Church tolerates cremation, but it still prefers burial or entombment in keeping with the ancient Christian custom (OCF 19). Cremation “does not enjoy the same value as burial of the body. The Church clearly prefers and urges that the body of the deceased be present for the funeral rites” (OCFa 413).

Officially, the church permits cremation in “extraordinary circumstances” when it is “the only feasible choice” (OCFa 415). Canon law prohibits cremation

only when “chosen for reasons contrary to Christian doctrine” (canon 1176/3), such as a disbelief in the sacredness of the body.

Some may criticize the Church’s reluctance to promote cremation, but the dossier of reasons bears rehearsing. For example, the bible speaks about the significance of the body of the deceased. “[The Lord Jesus Christ] will change our lowly body to conform with his glorified body” (Phil 3:21). “Just as we have borne the image of the earthly one, we shall also bear the image of the heavenly one” (1 Cor 15:49). The Nicene Creed professes belief in the resurrection of the body.

Further reasons for preferring burial of the body include these: At the wake, the body confronts the Christian faithful with the mystery of life and death. The body naturally recalls the personal story of faith, family bonds, friendship, words and deeds. The body was washed in baptism, anointed with oil, and fed with Bread of Life and the Cup of Salvation. It is destined for future glory at the resurrection. People experience another person through that person’s body. Care for the body of the deceased expresses the dignity of that person. Burial of the body imitates the burial of Jesus himself (OCFa 411-412).

If cremation is chosen, the cremated remains are to receive the same respect as the human body. They are to be placed in an appropriate vessel. They are to be carried and transported with care. A plaque or a stone with the name of the deceased should adorn a place of final disposition (OCFa 417).

Attentive readers of the appendix to the OCF note that it never uses the neologism “cremains,” but favors the more deliberate term “cremated remains.” The very expression aims to afford more respect to the body of the deceased.

The church clearly prefers that the remains receive a permanent, public place of honor. “The cremated remains should be buried in a grave or entombed in a mausoleum or columbarium. The practice of scattering cremated remains on the sea, from the air, or on the ground, or keeping cremated remains in the home of a relative or friend of the deceased are not the reverent disposition that the Church requires” (OCFa 417).

This request gained force in 2016 when the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith addressed the matter in its instruction *Ad resurgendum cum Christo: Regarding the Burial of the Deceased and the Conservation of the Ashes in the Case of Cremation*.⁶ “The reservation of the ashes of the departed in a sacred place ensures that they are not excluded from the prayers and remembrance of their family or the Christian community. It prevents the faithful departed from being forgotten, or their remains from being shown a lack of respect, which eventuality is possible, most especially once the immediately subsequent generation has too passed away. Also it prevents any unfitting or superstitious practices” (5). Consequently, the church does not permit the conservation of ashes in a domestic residence, nor the division of ashes among family members

⁶ <https://www.liturgyoffice.org.uk/Resources/OCF/Instruction-ARCC.pdf>.

(6), nor their preservation in jewelry or other objects, in order to avoid any appearance of pantheism, naturalism or nihilism (7).

Yet all these practices are spreading among Catholics. The hierarchy is virtually powerless over the decisions ordinary Catholics make to conserve or scatter the ashes of their loved ones.

The OCFa offers three options for funeral services involving cremation. The first of these prefers that cremation take place after the funeral liturgy. A funeral mass, for example, conducted in the presence of the body, concludes with the final commendation and farewell, as well as a dismissal (437-438). Then, after cremation, the committal of the ashes takes place.

In the second option the cremation and committal occur before the mass is celebrated (OCFa 423-424). A funeral mass follows, without the prayers of commendation, which have already preceded. In the United States such a mass is commonly called a “memorial mass,” signifying a funeral mass without the presence of the body. However, the OCF nowhere uses that expression, nor does the missal, preferring instead “funeral mass” or “mass for the dead.” In any case, ministers should avoid using prayers such as OCF 164C, which includes the expression “whose body we honor with Christian burial,” because the body has been reduced to ashes.

The third and presumably least favored option has become the most common one in the United States. The funeral liturgy unfolds in the presence of the cremated remains. A worthy vessel is to be prepared, something more dignified than the cardboard box that funeral homes sometimes provide. At church, a small table may occupy the place where the coffin usually rests, and the urn may rest there, perhaps with a photo of the deceased and flowers in decoration. The paschal candle shines from its usual adjacent place (OCFa 435).

At the start of the liturgy the minister may sprinkle blessed water upon the vessel at the door of the church, but in the United States the liturgy does not permit covering the vessel with a white cloth, presumably because the cloth represents a garment, and ashes cannot be clothed. In the entrance procession the priest and ministers precede the one who carries the cremated remains. The mass concludes with the commendation.

The committal in this circumstance is to take place as soon as possible after the liturgy (OCFa 430), but in practice, some Catholic families defer it indefinitely. Some are waiting for fairer weather. Others are awaiting the visit of out-of-town relatives. Still others just prefer to keep the ashes at home.

Columbaria, places of reservation for urns, are not permitted in parish churches in the United States (OCFa 430). Yet these do exist.

Theology of Salvation

Some of these trends in funeral liturgies promote the celebration of the life that the deceased did live, rather than the hopes for the life that the deceased may now enter. The prayers at the Catholic funeral mass are traditionally fraught

with some concern for God to show mercy upon the deceased. This explains why violet or black vesture is still permitted if not favored by some.

This theology of salvation is one reason that people may sense some disjuncture between their feelings at the time of a loved one's death and the service that the Catholic Church has to offer. Most want to remember the goodness of the deceased. Many friends will speak to mourners with words such as these: "I know that your loved one is now in heaven." Some homilies make the same point. However, the prayers from the missal and the OCF are never so confident.

One collect, for example, prays that the deceased "may rejoice to rise again."⁷ The prayers over the offerings pray that the deceased "may find in [the Lord's Son] a merciful judge," that their sins may "be forgiven and wiped away," and that God may "purify unceasingly" those who were baptized. These prayers more humbly approach the throne of the Almighty, appealing on behalf of a loved one who sinned and stands in need of mercy - rather than one who exhibited virtues and stands in need of praise.

This probably lies behind the caution that the rubrics express about the homily: "A brief homily based on the readings is always given after the gospel reading at the funeral liturgy and may also be given after the readings at the vigil service; but there is never to be a eulogy" (OCF 27). This probably means, "there is never to be a canonization." The preacher should be cautious not to preempt the divine judgment by declaring that the deceased does rest now with Christ, when the prayers of the church are not so sure.

This may also explain some of the caution behind the International Theological Commission's 2007 paper, "The Hope of Salvation for Infants Who Die Without Being Baptized."⁸ Even in the case of innocent children who die before baptism, the commission could not conclude definitively that they are saved. They rather presented "reasons for prayerful *hope*, rather than grounds for sure knowledge" (102). The Second Vatican Council's Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy was hoping that the funeral rites for deceased children would offer better consolation to grieving families, but apparently they can only go so far.

The Priest

The Introduction to the OCF concludes with some continually inspiring pastoral advice for priests: "Priests are to be particularly mindful of those who attend the liturgical celebration or hear the Gospel because of the funeral, but are either non-Catholics or Catholics who never or seldom take part in the eucharist or have apparently lost the faith. Priests are, after all, the servants of Christ's Gospel on behalf of all" (IOE 18).

⁷ Citations in this paragraph come from the *Roman Missal's* Masses for the Dead, For the Funeral.

⁸ http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20070419_un-baptised-infants_en.html.

Among a priest's responsibilities are to be at the side of the sick and dying, as indicated in the Roman Ritual, and to impart catechesis on the meaning of Christian death. He is to comfort the grieving family, to be as kind and helpful as possible, and to prepare a meaningful funeral, setting the liturgy into the total setting of the parish's liturgical life (IOE 25).

These admirable goals will guide not only the priest, but all in parish ministry, to offer proper pastoral care to the sick, the dying, the dead, and the mourners. Some of the insights gained through the Second Vatican Council continue to inspire the ministry of funerals. But as the landscape of contemporary culture continues to shift its shape, the old values of the past encounter new values in the present. Further changes may already be in process of evolution.

Anaphora 14:1 (June 2020):3-14.