



Never been to a funeral?
What can you expect?

*FAQs Regarding Funeral Liturgies and
Etiquette*

GENERAL INFORMATION:

WHY IS A FUNERAL IMPORTANT?

The funeral is a ceremony of proven worth and value for those who mourn. Funerals serve several purposes. In addition to commemorating the life of the deceased, a funeral offers emotional support to the bereaved and an opportunity for friends and family to pay tribute to their loved one. In most cases, the process of going through the planning and final disposition helps the family come to terms with the fact that a death has occurred.

Funerals celebrate the life of the deceased, but the funeral liturgies are also for the surviving family and friends. While you may want to be a lector or a eulogist, sometimes it is best to let others serve these functions, thus leaving the immediate family to be present to the day's events.

Customs for expressing sympathy vary according to religious and ethnic customs and traditions. The following information is offered merely as a guideline for what is generally accepted in various circumstances during a funeral.

SHOULD I PUT SOMEONE OBJECTIVE IN CHARGE OF FUNERAL HOME ARRANGEMENTS?

Someone who is responsible and is not overwhelmed by the death will be able to take the time to make prudent and wise choices. Those in grief typically are prone to make rushed or poor judgments and could be easily overwhelmed by the sense of a need to “just get things done”. You can save thousands of dollars while funeral planning simply by making decisions that are best for you and your departed loved one.

SHOULD CHILDREN GO TO FUNERALS?

Preparing children for a funeral is extremely important. Experiencing the death of a loved one, and being exposed to the funeral process, can be frightening and confusing experience for a child. One thing that many parents forget is that their young children may not understand what a funeral is, why it’s necessary or what will be happening. Particularly in the case of young children, it may be their first encounter with death and they may have many questions. The best way to approach the topic is with care, honesty, and presenting the information at a level that the child can easily understand.

Quite often, children may only be curious about one or two things. They almost certainly don’t want to know all the details of embalming or what happens to a body after death, etc. Surprisingly and generally detrimentally, some parents will tell their children everything about death and inadvertently traumatize the child. If a child asks, “What is the casket made of?”, answer “wood” and wait to see if they have any more questions.

Please understand that some children may not be able to deal with the burial. Before you bring a child to a burial, be sure they know what they’re going to see. Explain it step-by-step and stop to ask them if they have any questions. If they raise objections, they may not be ready, and we need to respect that. A child shouldn’t be forced to attend a funeral, if they strongly protest.

Sharing stories has a therapeutic effect on those in grief. Even young children can share memories. This becomes a great opportunity or way to pass on the deceased person’s legacy, as well as assist in the survivors’ healing process.

On the other hand, you may find that a child wants to be involved in the funeral. It may help the child understand the loss of a loved one more clearly, if they can participate in the process. Many kids just want to be included in the funeral in order to say goodbye to a loved one. They can also bring a flower or gift to the deceased to be placed on a memory table in the church or funeral home. Pictures and other items are placed on the table and help to create time of sharing as all take the opportunity to reflect back on the goodness of and good times with the deceased person. Children may also participate in the offertory procession. The bottom line however is to be open and sensitive to the child’s feelings and ability to process the death and mourning.

HOW DOES ONE WRITE AN OBITUARY?

Writing an obituary is an important part of funeral planning. An obituary can be very basic, including only the essential facts about a person's life, such as the names of children, grandchildren and the spouse; birthplace; the career(s) of the deceased; their interests and fascinations; and perhaps a favorite scripture verse or quote. On the other hand, an obituary can also be very personal, warm and unique.

An obituary can be taken care of in advance, especially if someone is terminally ill. Today, many people like to have a say in their own obituary or may want to write their own as a way of working through their own funeral planning. Having an obituary written before the time of the funeral removes some of the stress and anxiety associated with planning.

Writing a good obituary can even be a therapeutic part of grieving, allowing you time to express the feelings about the deceased that you really feel others should be aware of. You'll experience an assortment of emotions throughout the process, and ideally they should be reflected in the final product. We recommend that you check with the funeral home regarding fees incurred with publishing an obituary in the newspaper. Some newspapers charge per published word.

The basics of portions or components of writing an obituary include:

1. **General Information:** The name of the deceased, the dates and locations of birth and death, and (if appropriate) the cause of death.
2. **Biographical information:** About the person's life, the things they accomplished, their education, interests, hobbies, etc. What would the deceased most want to be remembered for in his or her life?
3. **Survivors:** A family tree lists the spouse, children, grandchildren, in-laws and any other close relatives.
4. **Schedule of Ceremonies:** List the time and location of viewings (also known as wakes) and all services.
5. **Memorials:** **These are** instructions on how to honor the deceased, from contributions to flowers or donations to the deceased or donor's favorite charity, etc.
6. **Arrangements:** This generally includes the funeral provider and may have a phone number to which people can direct questions.

IS THERE SUCH A THING AS PLANNING A TRADITIONAL CATHOLIC BURIAL?

A Catholic funeral, like all funerals, is a time of sadness and mourning. However, in our Catholic faith, there is also joy in the belief that a funeral represents the passing of the beloved into eternal life with Our Lord.

The Catholic Vigil is a prayer service, usually held the evening before the funeral. The community of friends and family gather at the funeral home or church for a service to remember the deceased person. The Vigil includes prayers for both the deceased and the surviving and grieving family. Eulogies are more appropriately read at the Vigil, instead of at the funeral service.

In our current day, many friends of the deceased may be unable to attend the funeral, so the Vigil has been found to be the more appropriate time for members of the family and friends to share memories of or to pay tribute to the deceased by giving of a eulogy or eulogies. Also, it is the appropriate time to recall those things which were dear to the deceased through photographs and other objects, and through the singing of favorite songs.

The core of the Catholic funeral celebration consists of several elements. These elements can be found in more detail in the parish's handbook entitled, "Funeral Mass and Vigil Planning". Specifically, regarding the burial of a loved one, there are two conventional methods: Interment and Cremation.

Interment: In the Catholic Church, there is a great deal of respect and dignity given to the human body. We believe that the body is the temple of the Lord and at the End of Days, there will be a resurrection of the body.

Caskets:

Most people in the funeral industry do not use the word coffin anymore, and have adopted 'casket' in its place. Whatever you call them, they are one of the most expensive items you will purchase in a traditional funeral. If a funeral is not pre-planned, there might not be a lot of time to consider casket purchases. Surveys show most consumers look at three choices, and opt for the one priced in the middle. If you do wish to purchase a traditional, ornate casket, you still need to consider variations in cost, which can result from the material used, the ornamentation involved as well as the casket company itself.

Cremation: Although previously a controversial subject within the Catholic Church, presently the Church permits cremation.

Urns:

If the loved one is cremated, their remains are stored in a cremation urn. To meet the demand caused by public acceptance of cremation, there are an increasing number of choices in urns, both in form and material. You can buy urns in almost any shape and size imaginable, made of any of a number of durable materials, from wood to precious metals. The designs of today's urns are becoming increasingly diverse and there are a lot of different forms to choose from.

Although cremation is currently permitted by the Church, it does not fully enjoy the same value as burial of the body. The Church strongly prefers and urges that the body of the deceased be present for the funeral rites, since the presence of the human body better expresses the values which the Church affirms in the funeral rites. Therefore, it is recommended that cremation take place *following* the funeral liturgy. We recommend that you check with the funeral home about the option of renting a casket also. This helps to keep the overall cost down, as you do not have the expense of purchasing the entire, new casket itself—simply use it for a short period of time.

Sometimes however, the Church understands that it is not feasible for the body to be present for the Funeral Mass. When such extraordinary circumstances make the cremation of the body the only feasible choice, the Church still provides funeral liturgical celebrations (including the Vigil for the Deceased; Funeral Liturgy inside or outside the Mass; and the Rite of Committal). Note, the cremated remains of the body should then be reverently buried or entombed in a cemetery or columbarium, Rite of Committal is celebrated at the cemetery or columbarium, as soon as possible, following the Funeral Liturgy and/or cremation.

The remains of cremated bodies should be treated with the same respect given to the corporeal remains of the human body. This includes the manner in which they are carried, the care and attention to appropriate placement and transportation, and their final resting place.

As previously discussed above, the cremated remains of a body should be entombed in a cemetery, mausoleum or columbarium. The practices 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 reverent disposition that the Church requires.

WHAT ARE EULOGIES?

The term 'eulogy' comes from the Greek language, meaning literally '*words of praise*'. Eulogies are perhaps the most common form of memorial. They are a unique form of public speaking, as the person who delivers a eulogy is usually not accustomed to public speaking before an audience—particularly not when they are in mourning. When delivering a eulogy one must remember to show respect for the deceased and be mindful of the feelings of those in the audience. All of these guidelines can generally make writing a eulogy one of the most difficult aspects of funeral arrangement planning, but one that can be genuinely very beneficial in the person

and/or family's grieving process. Writing the eulogy down also helps the person(s) to put things in a logical order and allows someone else to deliver the eulogy, if you are unable to at the last moment.

ARE THERE BENEFITS TO PRE-PLANNING A FUNERAL?

Pre-planning one's own funeral takes a great deal of the pressure off the surviving family and friends. Funeral pre-planning (also known as personal funeral planning) is a wise and increasingly popular practice that's becoming increasingly accepted and appreciated in the U.S. People are sometimes hesitant to pre-plan a funeral because they think they are not going to die anytime soon or they may not like the idea of thinking about their own death and funeral. There may even be some superstition that planning one's own funeral will somehow bring about their hasty death. This is untrue. Over time, many people move beyond their initial resistance to the idea and actually find funeral planning to be a freeing experience.

By pre-planning, you are able to make sure things are done in the way you would like them and you will know that you are relieving your loved ones of some very burdensome future responsibilities. You can begin the funeral planning process long before you are even close to death or seriously ill. If you are ill or in the process of dying, funeral planning can be a proactive way of dealing with the inevitable. If you pre-plan your funeral, you actually help your family to avoid some of the normal stress and chaos associated with death and funerals. Additionally, in many cases, by pre-planning funeral arrangements, you lock in and pay funeral costs at that point in time and avoid future cost increase/inflation in the years ahead.

IS A LAST WILL & TESTAMENT REALLY THAT IMPORTANT?

Funeral planning and estate planning are closely related in two respects: One, you can add funeral plans into your estate planning or will, and two, like funeral planning, estate planning can make your funeral much easier for your loved ones, since they won't have to fear or endure the legal hassles of probate or estate court proceedings.

There are many advantages to having a will and planning the management of your estate, particularly for anyone with assets or children and/or a spouse. The time of one's death will most likely be stressful and chaotic for the surviving loved ones. Estate planning allows you to remove at least some of the burden and stress. Many people feel they do not need a will, perhaps assuming that their assets are so little they don't require an estate plan. However, the fluctuating real estate values and stock markets (to name a few examples), make this position ill advised; regardless of the size of the estate.

Another popular misconception is that the State of Colorado or County of El Paso will sort out assets, so there's no need to do it yourself. While there is an existing legal process for settling one's probate/estate without a will, there is no guarantee that the state or county will sort out your assets fairly, if you don't provide written direction in the form of a will. More likely than not,

chances are things would not come out as you would have intended. We recommend that you contact a professional to help you decide what is best for your personal circumstance.

WHAT IS A MEMORIAL?

The process of planning a funeral inevitably involves the choice of a permanent memorial. The funeral itself is an important event that will help the bereaved deal with the loss of a loved one; but the creation of a memorial - which can be done in a number of different ways - offers a space to commemorate the deceased, and gives loved ones a place to visit as they work through their grief.

When someone has died, we want to memorialize them appropriately and reverently. The selection of a memorial may have been previously dictated by the deceased or it may be left up to loved ones. For those who pre-plan a funeral, there is an opportunity to choose a memorial that best suits the way they want to be remembered. Regardless of who chooses the memorial, it is generally an incredibly personal tribute.

Memorials are most often simply gravestones or tombstones. Gravestones are put in the cemetery and mark the place where the deceased is buried or interred. They may also be put at a mausoleum. Since they're meant to remain outside, tombstones need to be made of durable material - generally they are made from granite. A tombstone allows the bereaved a visible reminder of the deceased, which can be shaped or engraved to be a more personal tribute. Consult various funeral homes to determine the myriad of options available to you.

ARE THERE SAFETY CONCERNS TO BE AWARE OF AFTER DEATHS?

Regrettably, often times the deceased person's home may be targeted by criminals during the wake and funeral, because they suspect that no one will be in the home during these times. We recommend that you ask a trusted friend or neighbor to watch the home while you participate in the funeral liturgies.

IS THERE A NORM REGARDING THE CONSUMPTION OF ALCOHOLIC BEVERAGES

Generally speaking, the possession and/or consumption of alcoholic beverages (e.g., beer, hard liquor, etc) during funeral-related liturgies (e.g., the Vigil; the Funeral; etc) is prohibited. The consumption of alcoholic beverages and snacks would be better discussed or explored during private after-liturgical get-togethers of the immediate family and friends. Ultimately, the sacredness and reverence of the liturgies and respect of the deceased person are not conducive with the general consumption of alcoholic beverages.

IS THERE SUCH A THING AS VIGIL AND FUNERAL ETIQUETTE?

The best guides to proper funeral etiquette are discretion and reverence for the deceased and their surviving family. A few suggested principles of courtesy and etiquette to follow are:

1. **WHY SHOULD I GO?** If for some reason you are unable to attend the Vigil and/or Funeral, it is a common gesture for close friends of the bereaving family to visit the family's home to offer sympathy and assistance - this is sometimes referred to as a condolence visit. With the bereaving family having to ensure that all the arrangements are looked after, a close friend(s) may become very helpful with food preparation and childcare. The visit can take place any time within the first few weeks of death and may be followed with one or more additional visits, depending on the circumstances and your relationship with the family. Note, this may vary from family-to-family so please respect the family's wishes in this regard.
2. **WHAT SHOULD I SAY?** In addition to expressing sympathy (e.g., "... I'm sorry to hear that ..."; "... I'm sorry to hear of ___'s death, is there anything I can do for you" ..., etc) it is appropriate, if desired, to relay to family members your fond memories of the deceased. In some cases, family members may simply want you to be a good listener to their expressions of grief or their own memories of the deceased. In most circumstances, it is not appropriate to inquire as to the person's cause of death.
3. **THEY DON'T KNOW ME. WHY SHOULD I COME?** If you attend a viewing or wake, you should approach the family and express your sympathy. As with the condolence visit, it is appropriate to relay your memories of the deceased. If you were only acquainted with the deceased (and not the family) you should introduce yourself and explain how you came to know the deceased.

Your presence at the visitation demonstrates that although someone has died, friends still remain. Your presence is an eloquent statement that you care. Visitation provides a time and place for friends to offer their expression of sorrow and sympathy, rather than awkwardly approaching the subject at the office, supermarket or social activities. The obituary/death notice will designate the hours of visitation when the family will be present and will also designate the times when special services, such as lodge services or prayer services may be held. Persons may call at the funeral home at any time during suggested hours of the day or evening to pay respects, even though the family is not present. Friends and relatives are requested to sign the register book. A person's full name should be listed e.g. "Mrs. John Doe". If the person is a business associate, it is proper to list their affiliation, as the family may not be familiar with their relationship to the deceased.

4. **HOW LONG SHOULD I PAY MY RESPECT TO THE DECEASED?** It is customary to show your respects by viewing the deceased if the body is present and the casket is open. The length of time that you use to view the deceased's body is a matter of personal choice. A few moments of reverent prayer before the body would be appropriate, while only a few seconds, could reflect a sense of being rushed or uncomfortable with the situation. You may wish to say a silent prayer for, or meditate about, the deceased at this time. In some cases, the family may escort you to the casket.

5. ***HOW LONG SHOULD I STAY?*** The length of your visit at the viewing or wake is a matter of your personal discretion. Generally, a few moments conversing with the immediate family; viewing and praying before the deceased; and conversing with other family or friends present is strongly advisable.
6. ***DO I HAVE TO WEAR BLACK?*** As with other aspects of modern day society, funeral dress codes have relaxed *somewhat*. Black dress is no longer required. Instead subdued or darker hues should be selected—the more conservative the better. After the funeral, the family often receives invited visitors to the parish’s meeting area or their home for pleasant conversation and refreshments.
7. ***WHERE SHOULD I SEND FLOWERS?*** You can send flowers to the funeral home prior to the funeral or to the family residence at any time. If in doubt, florists know what is appropriate to send for a funeral setting.
8. ***CAN I MAKE A GIFT IN LIEU OF SENDING FLOWERS?*** Gifts in memory of the deceased are often made, particularly when the family has requested gifts in lieu of flowers. The family is notified of the gifts by personal note from the donor or through the donee, if the donee is a charity or other organization. In the latter case, the donor provides the family’s name and address to the charity at the time the gift is made.
9. ***SHOULD I SEND OR GIVE THE FAMILY A CARD?*** Even if you don’t make a gift, a note or card to the deceased’s family expressing your sympathy, condolences, and thoughts of the deceased is a welcome gesture, especially if you weren’t able to attend the funeral. Sending a card of sympathy, even if you are only an acquaintance, is appropriate. It means so much to the family members to know they are in your thoughts and prayers. The card should be in good taste and in keeping with your relationship to the family of the deceased.
10. ***ARE MASS CARDS APPROPRIATE FOR VIGILS OR FUNERALS?*** Mass cards can be sent either by Catholic or non-Catholic friends. The offering of prayers is a valued expression of sympathy to a family within the Catholic faith. A card indicating that a Mass for the deceased has been arranged may be obtained from any Catholic parish. The Mass offering card or envelope is given to the family as an indication of understanding, faith, and compassion. Make sure that your name and address is legible and that you list your postal code. This will make it easier for the family to acknowledge your gift.
11. ***COULD I JUST SEND THE FAMILY A PERSONAL NOTE INSTEAD?*** A personal note of sympathy is very meaningful. Express yourself openly and sincerely. An expression such as “I’m sorry to learn of your personal loss” will be welcomed by the family and can be kept with other messages.
12. ***SHOULD I BE A GOOD LISTENER?*** Speaking to a family member gives you an opportunity to offer your sympathy, services and make them feel and know that you genuinely care. If they wish to discuss their recent loss, don’t hesitate to talk to the person about the deceased. Be a good listener.
13. ***WHY SHOULD I CONTACT THE FAMILY AFTER THE FUNERAL?*** When the funeral service is over, the survivors often feel very alone in dealing with their feelings and trying to get back to a “normal” life after the loss of their loved one. It is important that they know you are still there. Keep in touch.

14. ***HOW APPROPRIATE IS IT TO DISCUSS THE DEATH WITH THE FAMILY?*** Regarding grief recovery, it is healthy to recognize death and discuss it realistically with friends and relatives. When a person dies, there is grief that needs to be shared. Expressions of sympathy and the offering of yourself to help others following the funeral are welcomed. It is important that we share our grief with one another. Your local funeral director and Catholic parishes can help family and friends locate available resources and grief recovery programs in your area.

Glossary of Terms for Funeral Planning

Words you'll want to know:

Beneficiary

Any recipient of the proceeds of a will or insurance policy.

Bequest

Any gift of property made in a will.

Bereaved

The immediate family of the deceased.

Burial Permit

Required by some states for human remains to be buried or cremated. Generally acquired by the mortuary or crematory as a part of the contracted funeral arrangement.

Casket

A casket is any container designed for holding human remains. It may be made of wood, metal or fiberglass.

Catafalque

The stand on which the casket rests while in state and during the funeral service.

Cemetery

Ground for burial, in which final aspects of the funeral ceremony are often held.

Cortege

The funeral procession.

Columbarium

Structure or building designed for the housing of urns of cremated remains, in niches.

Cremation

A regulated process using intense heat in a chamber to burn human remains. It typically takes 2 to 4 hours.

Crematory

A building with a furnace for the purpose of cremating human remains.

Crypt

Technically, any chamber that holds a casket and human remains. More specifically, it refers to an individual chamber in a mausoleum.

Death Certificate

A legal document, signed by a coroner or other medical health professional certifying the death of an individual. The death certificate is used for many legal processes pertaining to death, from arrangement for interment to the settlement of estate assets.

Embalming

Embalming is the procedure using chemicals, such as formaldehyde, to temporarily preserve human remains.

Eulogy

A eulogy is a form of public speaking at funerals used to honor and praise the deceased.

Funeral Director

The professional who prepares the body for burial, supervises burial and other services, and maintains a funeral home for these purposes. Also referred to as a mortician or undertaker.

Funeral Service

Ceremony, religious or secular, in which the bereaved say goodbye to the deceased in various ways, before the remains are permanently interred.

Funeral Spray

A large bouquet (25 or more) of cut flowers sent to the residence or the funeral home as a tribute to the deceased.

Grave Liner

A box or receptacle made of concrete or other durable material into which the casket is placed to prevent the ground from collapsing.

Internment

The act of burying a dead body in a grave.

Inurnment

Placing cremation ashes in an urn.

Living Will

A legal document that details the wishes of an individual concerning his or her medical care, especially with respect to life-sustaining technology and resuscitation.

Mausoleum

A structure or building, often on cemetery grounds, that holds caskets and remains.

Mortuary (also referred to as a Funeral Home or Funeral Parlor)

Any licensed, regulated business that provides for the care, planning and preparation of human remains for their final resting place. A mortuary usually arranges and conducts funeral and memorial services, embalming and other services such as the sale of caskets. Also called a funeral home or funeral service provider.

Niche

In a columbarium, an individual chamber wherein an urn is placed.

Opening and Closing Fees

Cemetery fees for the digging and refilling of a grave.

Pallbearers

Individuals (close family members, friends, etc.) who are asked to carry the casket.

Pre-need or Pre-planning

Pre-planning is arranging all aspects of your funeral (especially financing) in advance.

Urn

Any container made for holding cremated human remains.

Vigil

In the Roman Catholic Church, a service held on the eve of the funeral service.

Visitation

Normally held at the funeral home, this is a scheduled and announced time when the body is on display (if appropriate) and friends and family pay respects to the dead and visit with each other.

Wake

A wake is a traditional watch over the deceased usually conducted by family members and close friends. "Wake" and "watch" are etymologically related.

Will

A will is a legal document stating the intentions of the deceased concerning the dispersal of their belongings, the care of their remains and other relevant matters.