

Celebrant's Guides: Funeral Rites



Resources

Planning and managing a funeral well depends on the resources available to you. The Church's funeral rites are extremely flexible and can be combined in many different ways. The 'ideal' form proposed by the church is that the funeral rites take place in three stages: a prayer vigil, the main funeral liturgy, and the committal (i.e. the cremation or burial). The rites available for these stages are summarised in paragraphs 43-49 of the [General Introduction to the Order of Christian Funerals](#).

Throughout the funeral rites the text provides you with a choice of a number of different possible prayers or proclamations; and there is a further appendix of prayers you can use for particular circumstances (e.g. a child, a young person, an elderly person, a sudden death, and cases of suicide). It is easy to get lost in the text and you need to mark the book well beforehand, probably using post-it notes in addition to the strings available.

The proper books for use in England & Wales are listed on the Bishops' Conference website: the [dedicated page](#) contains most of the useful references but [another list](#) includes mention of the [study edition](#), which is a cheap paperback facsimile of the text in the main green funeral book. Be aware that the main liturgical book comes in two volumes, the second volume looking identical except for its thickness; [Volume I](#) contains all the texts you need, [Volume II](#) is only those for use at committals. In 2005 the Bishops' Conference [reissued Volume II](#) in a smaller format, and included the lectionary texts for funerals, but omitted the texts for children's committals. There's also a book for use when lay people preside at funeral rites: [In Sure and Certain Hope](#). Finally, most books containing parts of the Divine Office include the *Office for the Dead* which can be celebrated in memory of one who has died.

There are planning guides to help families available from the Bishops' Conference (*Into Your Hands*, published by [Decani](#)) and from [Redemptorist Publications](#). The Scripture texts for funerals are found in Volume III of the Lectionary; this [on-line resource](#) may be useful, though it uses the New American Bible instead of our Jerusalem Bible translation. An outline and the people's responses for the rite can be found in the Redemptorist booklet called [The Funeral Book](#) – it contains a limited selection of collects in an appendix.

Burials are a particular problem: inclement weather could quickly damage an expensive book, so many celebrants rely on photocopied sheets to put into a plastic pocket display folder. The Bishops' Conference website makes available the texts for [burial of a body](#), and the [interment of ashes](#). The church requires that human ashes be buried with dignity – they should neither be retained at home, nor strewn (see paragraph 239 of the *Order of Christian Funerals*).

It's useful to note that cremations are no longer forbidden for Catholics (as they were before 1967) except where a person chose cremation specifically as an act of rejecting Christian belief in the resurrection of the body (canons [1176.3](#) and [1184.1.2](#)). Be aware that the green [Funeral Services](#) book available in most crematoria contains useful hymns but only a bare outline of the Catholic rite, and few crematoria have a Catholic lectionary on site. There is no provision in the rites for a funeral liturgy in the presence of cremated remains, but the USA received an indult for this in 1997 – see [Fran Helner's article](#) for pastoral scenarios where this issue is likely to arise.

Music for Funerals

There are good resources to assist with the choice of music, provided by the Bishops' Conference: [detailed advice for musicians](#), and a [short list of suitable music](#). #824 of the *Ceremonial of Bishops* prescribes that the organ is only used at funerals to accompany singing, implying instrumental music is not appropriate for funerals. When a funeral includes a Requiem Mass, the usual norms for singing parts of the Mass apply. Any funeral liturgy should normatively contain the following musical parts:

- Song for the entrance procession
- Responsorial Psalm
- Gospel Acclamation
- Song of Farewell
- Song for the committal procession

Often mourners will ask for *The Lord's My Shepherd*. When you expect that most of the people attending the funeral will not be regular churchgoers, it is probably best to use the traditional text sung to the tune *Crimond*, which would be familiar to many. You can choose to use this after the first reading as the Responsorial Psalm, or in any hymn slot. But there are many [other musical settings](#) of this psalm, which lend themselves to being sung by a more experienced congregation and/or with the assistance of a cantor.

Perhaps the most unfamiliar part of the liturgy, which should normatively be sung, is the *Song of Farewell*. This is part of the final commendation and may be sung before, during or after the sprinkling and incensation of the coffin. This song is meant to focus on the deceased's final journey to God, and two texts are offered in the rite. For texts, see Appendix III.

- Option A, *I know that my Redeemer lives*, is a Long Metre hymn and could effectively be sung to the tune of *When I Survey the Wondrous Cross* or *All People That on Earth Do Dwell*. (The words are included on page 76 of the Crematorium [Funeral Services](#) and on pages 20 and 28 of the Redemptorist [Funeral Book](#)).
- Option B is difficult to sing unless you have a skilled choir to lead it. (The words are included on page 76 of the Crematorium [Funeral Services](#)).
- An alternative present in many parish hymn books is Ernest Sands' *May the Choirs of Angels* (e.g. *Celebration for Everyone* 485).
- Many bereaved families will request the well-known *Goin' Home* which is problematic because it doesn't reflect a good Catholic theology of death. Its bold assertion that "Mother's there, Father too" proclaims the deceased and parents to be reunited. We hope that this will turn out to be true, but we can't proclaim it so in our liturgy. There are alternative Christian versions: see Appendix II.

If the family or undertakers are producing a service book including the words of all the hymns used, you will not be constrained by the hymn books available in the venue for the funeral; but it is still useful to note the corresponding numbers from the available book so you can announce them if the number of booklets printed is not sufficient.

The Funeral Homily

A funeral homily must be carefully crafted. The Church requires that it be not a eulogy, but a proclamation of the Gospel ([GIRM #382](#)). Nevertheless, the homily will draw on the life and facts known about the deceased in some way – and more so if there is no-one giving a eulogy later on. It's important to ask the family what information they would like to have included in the homily, and an honest opening gambit – “I never knew N, but from speaking to his wife/children/so-and-so...” is best if the deceased was not known to you. If the family would like you, as celebrant, to give a eulogy at the appropriate time in addition to the homily, that's fine too.

In the homily, we must avoid the trap of canonising the deceased person; the liturgy presumes that the deceased person is in need of our prayers. Rather than speak of the deceased being in purgatory or heaven, it is best to use the language of “being in God's hands”, or “being on the way to their home in heaven”. The metaphor of an unfinished journey is appropriate, and you can stress the fact that our prayers help the soul to complete that journey. We must not speak ill of the dead, but neither should we whitewash people whose human weaknesses were well known to the congregation. It's also useful and correct to speak about our Christian hope in the resurrection of the body, since all souls, whether destined for heaven or hell, will receive their bodies again at the Second Coming.

The ‘homily’ material is not confined to the homily slot at the funeral. Numerous symbols are used which will not be familiar to those who aren't regular churchgoers: the pall, paschal candle, holy water, incense, the significance of placing the cross and Bible on the coffin... all of these can be commented on at some appropriate point in the liturgy to help mourners understand the rich symbolism taking place.

- For a person who was baptised but about whom little else is known by the preacher, speak about how baptism makes us members of the Body of Christ, and our hope to share in his resurrection.
- For a person who was not a regular worshipper but who did good works in their life (whether for charities or caring for their own family) focus on the fact God rewards good works (e.g. Mt 25:31-46) without falling into the trap of saying that our works earn salvation. “Joe was never really comfortable in church, but remained a child of God, and lived in hope of resurrection...”
- For a person who was active in the church community there is much more scope to show how the person practiced Christian virtues and put their hope in Jesus, to whom they have now returned.
- When a death was untimely or unexpected, it may help to acknowledge people's feelings of anger or shock, give them permission to be angry with God and work through that. (Note that loss of a spouse is often a reason for the widow/er ceasing attending church.)

It may be valuable to choose key phrases from the funeral prayers – “life is changed not ended”, our “sure and certain hope”, and also use these in the homily to maximise their impact.

Whatever you choose to say should pass the test of being both truthful and compassionate. It's beneficial to file your text, both to avoid repeating yourself at too many funerals, and in case of future come-back.

There are some sensitive words and phrases which may be better avoided.

“Resurrection of the body” may remind people of the dead body in the coffin; “life in Christ” is a more positive concept.

God’s “mercy” suggests wrongdoing on the part of the one receiving mercy; God’s “love” can be used without evoking this negative element.

Catholic Funerals for Non-Baptised Persons

It’s rare for a Catholic minister to be asked to conduct the funeral of an person who was not baptised. The three likely scenarios would be a miscarried child, a catechumen, or the spouse of a parishioner. In such a service, holy water and the white pall are never used, since these are baptismal symbols; the paschal candle and incense may be used (the latter not to honour the body but as a sign of offering prayer to God); and the symbols of Christian faith (cross and Bible) are positively encouraged (see ##518-523, pages 367-368 of the *Order of Christian Funerals*).

The church does provide committal prayers for a child which has been miscarried, which can be found at ##503-509, pages 358-363 of the *Order of Christian Funerals*. The rite may be carried out in hospital before the remains of the foetus are taken for disposal according to the hospital’s normal procedure; but the parents may wish to have a more formal service in church with the body present. Additional resources can be found in collects #13-15 on pages 427-428.

A collection of adaptations for use in the case of a catechumen is provided on pages 366-376 of the *Order of Christian Funerals*. Similar adaptations removing references to personal faith and Christian commitment would be made in the case of an unbaptised spouse, for which note collect #36 on page 419. For an upright non-baptised person, Micah 6:6-8 could be an appropriate reading.

Pastoral & Canonical Checklist

Questions to ask yourself after the first (and subsequent) meeting with mourners.

1. Is the deceased baptised?
2. Had the deceased express notorious opposition to the Catholic faith?
3. What proportion of the mourners would be communicants?
4. Is the proposed date a day when requiem Masses are prohibited?
5. Which elements of the service are the family capable/willing of being involved in planning?
 - Readings (and who reads?)
 - Music (is there a soloist or cantor?)
 - Prayer of the Faithful (special inclusions?)
6. Is it clear whether or not there will be a eulogy, and which details are in your homily?
7. Have you asked the family “Is there anything traditional you expect at this funeral?”
8. Are you attending any social gathering afterwards?

FUNERAL ARRANGEMENTS

THE DECEASED	
Full Name	
Phonetic/Nickname	
Date of Birth	
Baptismal Status	
Date of Death	
Date of Committal	
Last Address	

CHIEF MOURNER	
Christian Name	
Surname	
Religion	
Landline Tel.	
Mobile Tel.	
E-mail	
CONTACT ADDRESS	

Significant Next of Kin:

Undertakers: _____ **Date requested:** _____

Special Needs Considerations? _____

Reception of the Body: Simple Vigil Office At Main

Main Funeral Liturgy: Liturgy Liturgy with Communion Requiem Mass

Form of Committal: Burial Cremation Body Absent

Post-Funeral Gathering: _____

Ashes to be interred? No Yes: Details _____

ADMIN: Tick when recorded in funeral register

File closed on: _____ **Signed:** _____

Appendix I: Hymns in the 2005 Edition of the Crematorium *Funeral Services* Book

The following hymns can be found in the current edition of *Funeral Services* (three fewer hymns are in older editions but I do not know which ones are absent, and whether the page numbering differs).

- 38 God be in My Head
- 76 I Know That My Redeemer Lives
- 76 Saints of God, come to his/her aid
- 79 Abide With Me
- 80 All Things Bright and Beautiful
- 81 Alleluia, Sing to Jesus
- 82 Amazing Grace
- 83 And Did Those Feet? (Jerusalem)
- 84 Be Still My Soul: the Lord is on your side
- 85 Blest Are The Pure in Heart
- 86 Dear Lord and Father of Mankind
- 87 Eternal Father Strong to Save (the Sailor's Hymn: those in peril on the sea)
- 88 For All The Saints
- 90 Great is Thy Faithfulness
- 91 Guide Me O Thou Great Redeemer (Bread of Heaven: to Cwm Rhondda)
- 92 How Sweet the Name of Jesus Sounds
- 93 I Am The Bread Of Life (and I will raise you up on the last day)
- 94 I Heard the Voice of Jesus Say
- 95 Immortal, Invisible
- 96 In Heavenly Love Abiding
- 97 Jesus Lives! Thy Terrors Now (alleluia)
- 98 Jesu, Lover Of My Soul
- 99 Just As I Am
- 100 Lead Us, Heavenly Father, Lead Us
- 101 Lord Of All Hopefulness
- 102 Love Divine
- 103 Love's Redeeming Work is Done
- 104 Make Me a Channel of Your Peace
- 105 Morning Has Broken
- 106 Now Thank We All Our God
- 107 O God Our Help in Ages Past
- 108 O Jesus I Have Promised
- 110 O Lord My God, When I in Awesome Wonder (How Great Thou Art)
- 111 O Love That Wilt Not Let Me Go
- 112 On a Hill Far Away Stood an Old Rugged Cross
- 113 Peace, perfect peace, in this dark world of sin
- 114 Praise My Soul the King of Heaven (alleluia)
- 115 Rock of Ages
- 116 The Day Thou Gavest
- 117 The King of Love My Shepherd Is
- 118 The Lord's My Shepherd
- 119 The Strife is O'er (alleluia)
- 120 There is a Green Hill Far Away
- 121 There Is A Redeemer
- 122 Thine Be the Glory
- 123 To God Be The Glory (Praise the Lord)
- 124 When I Survey the Wondrous Cross

Appendix II: The Song of Farewell

(A) I Know That My Redeemer Lives

This hymn is not to be confused with the [Wesley hymn](#) having the same first line.

I know that my Redeemer lives,
and on that final day of days,
His voice shall bid me rise again:
Unending joy, unceasing praise!

This hope I cherish in my heart:
To stand on earth, my flesh restored,
And, not a stranger but a friend,
Behold my Saviour and my Lord.

The *Order of Christian Funerals* suggests the melody [Duke Street](#) which may be more familiar as a tune used for the hymns [Jesus Shall Reign](#) or [Fight the Good Fight](#).

Any other [Long Metre](#) tune which fits the gravity of the occasion may be used; particularly suitable might be the melodies [Rockingham](#) (known as a setting of [When I Survey the Wondrous Cross](#)) or [Old Hundredth](#) ([All People That on Earth Do Dwell](#)).

(B) Saints of God

Saints of God, come to his/her aid!
Hasten to meet him/her, angels of the Lord!

℞ Receive his/her soul and present him/her to God the Most High.

May Christ, who called you, take you to himself;
may angels lead you to the bosom of Abraham. ℞

Eternal rest grant unto him/her, O Lord,
and let perpetual light shine upon him/her. ℞

(C) Catholic Text for *Goin' Home*

The [original text](#) of *Goin' Home*, by William Arms Fisher, is [sung](#) to the *Largo* from Dvorak's New World Symphony – a familiar tune from the Hovis adverts on British TV, [available in electronic form](#). The words are very sentimental and do not accord with Catholic doctrine on the fate of those who die.

The [text modified](#) by Ken Bible is one form consistent with Christian teaching. Another is the following text, made available to me by Fr John Meredith of the [Archdiocese of Cardiff](#), without indication of authorship:

SONG OF FAREWELL

Going home, moving on,
through God's open door;
hush my soul, have no fear,
Christ has gone before.
Parting hurts, love protests,
pain is not denied;
yet, in Christ, life and hope
span the great divide.
Going home, moving on,
through God's open door;
hush my soul, have no fear,
Christ has gone before,
Christ has gone before.

No more guilt, no more fear,
all the past is healed:
broken dreams now restored,
perfect grace revealed.
Christ has died, Christ is ris'n,
Christ will come again:
death destroyed, life restored,
love alone shall reign.
Going home, moving on,
through God's open door;
hush my soul, have no fear,
Christ has gone before,
Christ has gone before.

SONG OF FAREWELL

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death destroyed, life restored,
love alone shall reign.
Going home, moving on,
through God's open door;
hush my soul, have no fear,
Christ has gone before,
Christ has gone before.

Appendix III: Other Suitable Funeral Hymns

- 789 *We walk by faith*
- 503 *My Song is Love Unknown*
- 781 *We hold the death of the Lord*
- 754 *Unless a Grain of Wheat*
- 238 *Hail Queen of Heaven, the Ocean's Star*
- ? *Peace, perfect peace, is the gift of Christ Our Lord*

(CFE numbers)

Various US parishes have their own lists – to find one you might find useful I suggest entering the terms “Catholic funeral music” into [Google](#).

Church Music Site [funeral index](#)

See index of '[Eternal Life Hymns](#)'

Suggestions from [CanticaNova](#)

Suggestions from [OCP](#)

Appendix IV: Suitable Prayers and Readings

From Cardinal Newman's [Sermon 20](#):

Let us beg of our Divine Lord to take to Him His great power,
and manifest Himself more and more,
and reign both in our hearts and in the world.
Let us beg of Him to stand by us in trouble,
and guide us on our dangerous way.
May He, as of old,
choose "the foolish things of the world to confound the wise, and the
weak things of the world to confound the things which are mighty"
May He support us all the day long, till the shades lengthen,
and the evening comes, and the busy world is hushed,
and the fever of life is over, and our work is done!
Then in His mercy may He give us safe lodging,
and a holy rest, and peace at the last!