THE ORDER OF CHRISTIAN FUNERALS

A review of the Roman Catholic Order of Christian Funerals. Originally published in the Catholic Messenger, the newspaper of the Roman Catholic Diocese of Davenport. © 2013. Reprinted here with permission. All rights reserved.
The Order of Christian Funerals

Why do we have funerals? The Order of Christian Funerals (OCF) gives three reasons: in its funeral rites “[1] the Church intercedes on behalf of the deceased… and [2] ministers to the sorrowing and consoles them… with the comforting word of God and the sacrament of the eucharist” as well as [3] offers “worship, praise, and thanksgiving to God for the gift of a life which has now returned to God” (OCF 4-5).

In order to do all three of these well, we need to remember: funerals are not about the deceased (or those who mourn them). Just as weddings are not about the couple (or the bride); just as Baptisms, First Communions and Confirmations are not about the kids or teens. They are not the center of attention, the focus, of the liturgy. Now, before you all start writing letters to the editor, hear me out! I am not saying that we ought to ignore the deceased or the bereaved, couples or kids; that they are not important; that funerals or weddings ought to be generic. What I am saying is that our focus in the liturgy must always be on Christ, and on his Paschal Mystery. It is Christ, in the power of the Holy Spirit, who mediates our encounter with the Father.

Think of a pair of glasses. If we look through them, we see clearly what we ought to see. If we try to focus on the glasses themselves, what we are supposed to be looking at gets blurry, distorted, out of focus. What the deceased and the bereaved are at funerals are the lenses that help us focus on Christ at this particular time and in this particular place. Couples at weddings and kids at the sacraments of initiation do the same thing. They ought not replace Christ as the focus, but help us to focus on Christ in a particular way. If we focus on them, Christ gets blurred, distorted.

So far from ignoring the dead or the bereaved at funerals (or the couple at a wedding, etc.), they are crucial. Funerals and weddings ought not be generic. But they ought to be about Christ—as encountered or revealed in the life of this faithful Christian that has died, of this community that mourns him or her. In other words, we attend to what is particular—this deceased person, these mourners—not in and of themselves, but only as part of something bigger. That’s why the term “celebration of life service” ought to have no place in the Catholic lexicon, and why eulogies are not permitted at Catholic funerals. We do not celebrate the life of the deceased in and of themselves or speak in remembrance of them in an exaggerated way, but recall their lives as a sign of God’s grace and generosity, of God’s presence and action in the world. We do not celebrate the liturgy as an exercise in isolated self-expression, but only as an expression of the faith of the Church; that is why the Church regulates—and must regulate—what is said, sung, or done at funerals (and weddings).

In the Catholic way of celebrating funerals, we have three core Rites: the Vigil, the Funeral, and the Committal. In fact, it is best to think of this sequence not as three separate liturgies but as one liturgy in three parts—like the Easter Triduum. In addition to these core rites, the OCF provides the minister with a number of other resources, such as prayers after death, for the first time the family gathers in the presence of the body, and at the time the body is transferred to the church.
This core sequence of rites—one liturgy in three stations—is indeed one of the most remarkable achievements of the liturgical reform. Why? Because in its very structure—three stations separated by processions—it mirrors the journey of life and the journey of grief. It is structured like a lament, and thus helps mourners not only express their grief but also begin the journey of integration.

If we look at the lament psalms in the Bible, we see this common pattern: the psalmist cries out his present pain, looks back in faith and recounts the good that God has done for him (or for the people); and, because of God’s faithfulness in the past, the psalmist can look to the future with hope. The OCF does the same thing. While each of the major rites attends to the past, present, and future—and ministers to the bereaved, gives praise and worship to God, and prays for the dead—the vigil, funeral, and committal each have their particular emphasis on one of the three.

Interestingly, contemporary studies on grief and loss also speak of promoting healthy mourning by allowing for the expression of grief (present), remembrance of the deceased (past), and the opportunity to make meaning (integrate the loss; future)—the very pattern that we find in the OCF. Please see the table below for a synopsis of what I am presenting here.

At the Vigil, the ministry of the Church in accompanying mourners in their bewilderment, shock, and grief is stressed. These rites focus on the present, and are intended to help “mourners express their sorrow and to find strength and consolation” in the paschal mystery of Christ (OCF 52). The importance of the Christian community’s support to the mourners is emphasized, as is the centrality of the word of God as source of consolation (OCF 51, 56, 59-60). In addition to the version of the Vigil found in the main part of the OCF, the Office for the Dead from the Liturgy of the Hours may be used instead. If necessary, the Vigil (either version) may be repeated.

At the Funeral Liturgy (within or outside of Mass), our emphasis shifts from present to past, to giving “praise and thanks to God for Christ’s victory over sin and death: and on commending “the deceased to God’s tender mercy and compassion” (OCF 129), especially in the Final Commendation (OCF 146). The funeral recalls the past in order to comfort in the present and open up a new future. By viewing the great deeds of God in the past through the lens of the life of the deceased, God’s past promises can once again be embraced, here and now.

The Rite of Committal emphasizes hope in the face of the stark and final reality of death (OCF 206, 209). Our attention on the past and present gives way to a focus on the eschatological future, on the promise of the Resurrection. That’s why the actual interment of the body is a part of the rite itself; we need to face that reality, to be part of that final letting go. It should not be left to later, with only strangers in attendance.

Movement itself is an important part of the ritual. Typically we would move from the place of the Vigil to the church, and from church to cemetery. This movement reminds us of the journey through life as well as the journey through grief. The OCF states that “[t]he procession to the church is a rite of initial separation from the deceased; the procession to the place of committal is the journey to the place of
final separation of the mourners from the deceased” (OCF 120). That’s why the OCF also includes prayers for this times (as mentioned above).

Taken as a whole, the OCF is a rite of transition: it moves us out of one identity, through an in-between time, and then reintegrates into the community with a new identity. We see this commonly in the RCIA: through the Rite of Acceptance, one moves out of their former life as an unbaptized individual into the catechumenate, an in-between time. At the Easter Vigil, through the sacraments of initiation, one becomes a neophyte. We do the same thing with marriage (single → engaged → married) and with Holy Orders (layman → candidate for orders → deacon/priest). In the middle, or liminal (in-between) phase, other rites are celebrated to move one through the transition. The OCF does the same thing.

The Vigil is a rite of separation, moving us—mourner and deceased alike—from “life as usual” before death to the in-between time before burial. The Funeral is a rite of transition. The deceased is no longer living in this world and is not yet commended to the next or committed to the earth or the long-term memory of the community. For mourners, life before this death has ended; life after this death, the day-in and day-out routines that will need to be learned without this loved one physically present, is yet to begin. The Committal serves to begin the integration of the living into life after the death of a loved one, incorporating them in the community with their new identities as widow(er) instead of spouse, orphan instead of child. Likewise, the deceased is also incorporated into the community in a new way: in memory, and as part of the Church outside of time.

These rites function well—do what they are supposed to do—as long as they are celebrated as an integral whole… and with the particularity of the deceased person and the mourners in mind. One of the most underused resources in the OCF is the prayers in the appendix. There, in the back of the OCF, you will find prayers that were written with particular persons in mind: a deceased cleric or religious, for children or young persons or the elderly, for parents and married couples, for husbands and wives. There are also prayers appropriate for specific situations: for those who died after a long illness or for those who died suddenly, for those who died accidentally or violently or by suicide.

In 1997, an Appendix on Cremation was added to the OCF. The Church honors the human body even after death; it can be said that the body is the “sacrament” of the person—our bodies are how we are made present to others. Therefore, there is a strong preference for burial in the Christian tradition, especially since Jesus, too, was buried.

Because of the honor we pay the body, universal law does not allow funerals in the presence of cremated remains. In the United States, we have an exception to that rule and the Bishop may allow for such (as is done in this diocese). Regardless, it is clear that the Church prefers that the Vigil and Funeral be celebrated with the body present. If celebrated in the presence of cremated remains (not “cremains”; see below) there are some adjustments to the rite and prayers.

It must be mentioned that any action that turns the body into a “thing”—a commodity—for us to manipulate is not permitted. Even the term “cremains” subtly (or not so subtly) does this very thing.
Scattering the ashes, dividing them up, making them into other objects, or even keeping the urn with cremated remains in the home are therefore not permitted. We would never do these things with a body before cremation; we ought not do so with a body after. Not only do these practices disrespect the body, the sacrament of the person, but in some subtle ways may reflect our misdirected desire to control death and deny its finality. Our faith in the Resurrection calls us to more than that.

**The Order of Christian Funerals as a Rite of Passage and Lament**

(From: Francis L. Agnoli, “‘First of All, Do No Harm’ – Lament in the Development of a Gentle Funeral Homiletic” (D.Min. thesis, Aquinas Institute of Theology, 2009), 54.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rite of Passage</th>
<th>Catholic Rites</th>
<th>Focus of the OCF</th>
<th>Lament (Paschal Mystery)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pre-liminal ↓</td>
<td>• Pastoral Care of the Sick (e.g., Anointing of the Sick, Viaticum)</td>
<td>To “minister to the sorrowing” (OCF §4)</td>
<td><strong>The Present:</strong> Complaint. Naming of the hurt or reason for suffering. (Good Friday)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rites of Separation ↓</td>
<td>• Commendation of the Dying • Prayers after Death • Prayers in the Presence of the Body • Vigil • Transfer of the Body • Procession to Church</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liminal</td>
<td>• Reception of the Body • Funeral • Rite of Commendation</td>
<td>To offer “worship, praise, and thanksgiving to God for the gift of a life which has now been returned to God” (OCF §3)</td>
<td><strong>The Past:</strong> Petition / anamnesis: the deeds of God are recalled, giving cause for hope. Submission. (Holy Saturday)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rites of Transition</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post-liminal ↓</td>
<td>• Procession to Place of Burial • Rite of Committal • Anniversary and Memorial Masses • All Souls Day</td>
<td>To “intercede on behalf of the deceased” (OCF §4)</td>
<td><strong>The Future:</strong> Relinquishment. The vow of praise / thanks. A sense of assurance. (Easter Sunday)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The past, present, and future—as well as ministry to the sorrowing, the offering of praise and thanks to God, and intercession for the dead—are part of all three rites. The table shows which aspect is emphasized at the Vigil, Funeral, and Committal (and their associated rites).