

In the face of death, the Church confidently proclaims that God has created each person for eternal life and that Jesus, the Son of God, by his death and resurrection, has broken the chains of sin and death that bound humanity. Christ achieved his task of redeeming humanity and giving perfect glory to God, principally by the paschal mystery of his blessed passion, resurrection from the dead, and glorious assumption. Therefore, if in union with Christ we have imitated his death, we shall also imitate him in the resurrection. [Romans 6:5]. –

“Order of Christian Funerals” CCCB, 1990, #1,2

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ;

The Church, as the fountain of God’s grace, enters into the mystery of the resurrection each and every time we celebrate the rites associated with death. Cardinal Gut stated in 1969 that “by means of the funeral rites it has been the practice of the Church, as a tender mother, not simply to commend the dead to God, but also to raise high the hope of its children and to give witness to its own faith in the future resurrection of the baptized with Christ.”

The pledge of God is that even in death the dignity of the baptized is not lost, for in dying in Christ we gain an everlasting home in the kingdom of heaven. Sure and certain is the hope of the resurrection for all who believe in Jesus Christ. The richness of the traditions and rituals of our worship at the time of death provides consolation and compassion at a difficult and trying time.

Over the past 18 months the Diocesan Commission for Liturgy, in collaboration with the Council of Priests and many who work in parish pastoral situations, have sought to reaffirm the foundational practices of our worship that will enhance the celebration of Christian funerals. Understanding the great diversity that exists in our worship today I seek to provide, through the means of these few directives, a reaffirmation of the basic principles by which we are all called into solidarity as we celebrate the funeral rites.

I am confident that by working together we can draw deeply from the wellsprings of our great traditions. The liturgies and rituals of our worship have provided families with a concrete expression of faith that has allowed them to truly thank God for the blessings of life and to praise God for the wonders of the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

These simple directives and guidelines restate the principles and values in the “Order of Christian Funerals” that was promulgated for use in Canada in 1990 by the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops. I ask that all parishes work toward implementing these guidelines.

1. The proper place for the celebration of the funeral rites is the parish church. Priority should be given for celebrating the Rite of Welcome of the Body, the Vigil for the Deceased and the funeral Mass in the parish church.
2. Parishes should ensure the full use of the Christian symbols associated with the funeral rites (paschal candle, baptismal water, incense, funeral pall, etc.).
3. All music used in the celebration of the funeral rites should come from an approved Christian hymnal or missal. At the funeral Mass, parishes should ensure the proper use of sung acclamations during the celebration of the Eucharist. The use of secular and pop music during the celebrations of the funeral rites is not permitted.
4. Pastors and those authorized for preaching at the funeral rites should ensure a familiarity with the deceased. This may include meeting with family members before the funeral rites are celebrated. Homilies should speak of our faith and hope in the resurrection and should speak also of the life of the deceased in the light of their faith commitment. Such personal homilies provide great consolation for the family.
5. If desired, a family member or friend may speak words of remembrance on behalf of the deceased. The approved place for such words during the funeral rites is at the Vigil for the Deceased. They may also be delivered at a time outside of the funeral rites such as the lunch following the funeral or at some other gathering. Words of remembrance are not allowed at any other time during the celebration of the funeral rites.
6. Cremation and the presence of cremated remains at the funeral rites is permitted. Priority should be given to having the body present for the funeral rites and then cremation following the said rites.

I thank all of you for your attention and implementation of these guidelines. Be assured of my prayers for all who aid our families at the time of death. May this renewal in spirit prepare all of us for the joyful reunion that awaits us in the heavenly kingdom.

Sincerely in Christ,

Most Rev. Albert LeGatt
Bishop of Saskatoon

Bishop LeGatt reflects on the place of the homily and the eulogy within funeral rites

**By Most Rev. Albert LeGatt
Bishop of Saskatoon**

With a desire to enhance the celebration of Christian funerals in our diocese, and after discussion with the Diocesan Liturgical Commission and the Council of Priests, as well as with the pastors, parish life directors and parish pastoral associates of our diocese, I have decided to issue some directives in regards to several elements of our funeral rites.

These deal with 1) the proper and preferred place for the funeral rites which is the parish church, 2) the full use of Christian symbols, 3) the choice of music, 4) the importance and nature of the homilies and preaching at the funeral, 5) the place for words of remembrance (eulogies) if desired by the family, 6) conditions surrounding cremation.

These directives are to serve as a reminder of what we celebrate as an expression of our Christian faith and hope at the time of death and grief. It is also a reminder of what is already present in our ritual “Order of Christian Funerals” promulgated for use in Canada in 1990 by the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops.

Through these directives we hope to assure that our funeral celebrations are ever more a celebration that unites the family and friends of the deceased, the parish community of faith, and indeed the whole Church, in giving praise and thanks to God for the gift of everlasting life offered to all through the mystery of Christ’s death and resurrection, as we prayerfully entrust the destiny of the dearly departed into God’s loving merciful hands. Remembering and honouring the deceased we turn to God, the source of all life. We give thanks to God for the gifts of faith and love present in the person’s life. We pray that through Christ’s redeeming love the person will receive eternal salvation. We pray for one another that each may be given the strength and consolation of Christian faith, hope and mutual support of charity at this time of grief and farewell. We reaffirm our desire to walk and live together in Christian faith, to live each day God gives us with Christ as our Way, Truth and Life on our journey to our everlasting home. We pray for God’s loving grace in all things, the grace of life in Jesus forever, he who has conquered death forever.

From this it is clear that the primary focus of our celebration of Christian funerals must be an act of prayer and thanksgiving for Christ’s victory over sin and death, a proclamation of the paschal mystery. It is a celebration of life – the life of the Risen Christ present in the person deceased, present in the family and friends and in the faith community gathered around them, and present in the Church as a whole.

The personal circumstances of the deceased’s life and death are given their final meaning and hope in and through Christ. The journey of grieving and moving on with hope and love by the family and friends finds its source and meaning in and through Christ. The Christian community as a whole is renewed in and through Christ as it observes and commemorates this passage from life to death and unto everlasting life.

Therefore it is all important that our celebration of Christian funeral powerfully express this faith and hope. These directives are ways to ensure and promote this primary focus. In regards to this I would like to offer some thoughts in particular concerning the Scripture reading and homilies as well as concerning the place of words of remembrance (eulogies).

A very important way to render the funeral celebration meaningful and personal for the family is through the selection of Scripture readings and through the nature and content of the homily that breaks open the Word of God proclaimed to all as a message of faith, consolation and hope for them at this time. The priest, parish life director or member of the bereavement team of the parish who meets the family to plan the funeral as part of their pastoral care at this time should genuinely take the steps needed to learn of the life and passing away of the deceased.

This must be done so as to ensure appropriate Scripture readings and so as to prepare a homily or homiletic reflection that combines the proclamation of Christian faith and the personal dimension that is called for in the particular circumstances. The homilist can note in appropriate ways the person's attributes and accomplishments, inviting the family and friends to hold on to the values and lessons of the person's life. The homily should have a narrative style. At a funeral, there is a story to be told — a real person's story — not on its own, but in relation to God: a story of faith, a story of love.

In the introduction to the "Order of Christian Funerals" the proper approach is described thus: "A brief homily based on the reading is always given after the gospel reading at the funeral liturgy and may also be given after the readings of the vigil service: but there is never a eulogy. Attentive to the grief of those present, the homilist should also help the members of the assembly to understand that the mystery of God's love and the mystery of Jesus' victorious death and resurrection were present in the life and death of the deceased, and that these mysteries are active in their lives as well. Through the homily, members of the family and community should receive consolation by the saving Word of God (27)".

In view of the primary focus at the Eucharist of the funeral rite, a focus of Christian faith as it touches the life of the family and that of the Christian community, a focus manifested in the Scripture readings, in the homily, in the prayers and intercessions and in the celebration of the Eucharist itself, I am also reminding the faithful of the diocese of the corresponding directive about words of remembrance (eulogies).

"If desired, a family member or friend may speak words of remembrance on behalf of the deceased. The approved place for such words during the funeral rites is at the Vigil for the Deceased. They may also be delivered at a time outside of the funeral rites such as the lunch following the funeral or at some other gathering. Words of remembrance are not allowed at any other time during the celebration of the funeral rites."

In regards to the flow of the whole order of Christian funerals and the role of the homily (and the role and place of the words of remembrance if desired by the family) I'd like to quote some comments made by Bishop Henry of Calgary recently: "We believe that there's a natural development that should take place with respect to our grieving process, and the vigil or the wake — it's at that particular occasion that the reality of the death really starts to sink in. Friends gather to support family; they express their sorrow; there's a lot of reminiscing going on about the deceased. This is the time for storytelling.

"When you get to the funeral Mass itself, you're presenting the deceased to God; you're giving thanks to God for the life of the dearly departed. But at this particular time when you're celebrating the Eucharist, the focus shifts from our memories and life with the deceased to now the new life that the deceased enjoys with God. So you have a natural movement from the past to the present, and then projecting us into the future with the eschatological hope of the life of the blessed in the kingdom of God." (*Interview with Bishop Frederick Henry of the Roman Catholic Diocese of Calgary on the CBC program "The Sunday Edition" originally broadcast May 4, 2003*).

It is therefore for this reason that I am reminding pastors, parish life directors and all the faithful of what practice we should have as a whole diocese in regards to this matter. We have met and discussed this as well with the funeral directors.

I invite all the faithful to reflect then upon the realities of faith and life and death and the promise of everlasting life in Christ that we experience as Christians, and to deepen our sense of how this is celebrated within our funeral liturgies with its various moments and contexts.

Thank you for your sincere and genuine consideration of these matters, and your application of these directives as details of funeral arrangements are planned and prepared in our parishes.