

Guide for Planning a Catholic Funeral at Holy Ghost & St. Stephen

Introduction

The loss of a loved one can be very painful. There are many things to attend to and we might not have had to plan a funeral before. The Church is there to help – to pray for your loved one in our faith in the Resurrection of Our Lord Jesus Christ, to comfort the family, and to assist with the practicalities.

'At this time of your loss I would like to offer you my condolences. Please know that each day those who have died are remembered at every Mass, as are those who mourn. I hope the Church's prayer will be a comfort and consolation for you at this testing time. Preparing the funeral service of someone who has died can be a difficult thing to face. This leaflet has been prepared to make the preparations easier. May the time you spend reflecting on the Word of God strengthen your trust and faith in God's love and mercy. Please do make an appointment with your parish priest to discuss the funeral arrangements. He will have a lot of experience of preparing and celebrating the Funeral Liturgy of the Church. He will welcome your suggestions and consider how he can then best prepare the Liturgy in line with the Church's tradition, and respectful of your particular circumstances. I hope you find what follows helpful at this difficult time,' Vincent, Cardinal Nichols

Initial Steps

- Before any practical arrangements can be made, a death certificate must be issued and funeral directors instructed. (If a coroner is involved, e.g. because someone died unexpectedly, this may delay matters.) All the funeral directors in the Askew and Uxbridge Roads are very familiar with the practicalities here. The experience of some other funeral directors has not been as good. Please have a word if you would like further information.
- Check whether the deceased left any instructions regarding their funeral – possibly a letter of wishes with their Will. It can help to write such a letter of wishes – provided we appreciate that it will be implemented according to the tradition of the Church and what is possible/realistic at the time.
- **What form will the funeral take?** For a practising Catholic this is normally a funeral Mass in the parish where they were resident or attended Mass. It is possible to have a funeral service (without Mass) in church or at a crematorium.
- **Where will the committal take place?** This final act of farewell is either a burial or a cremation. If there has been a church service first, a brief committal service takes place immediately afterwards. Most of our burials and cremations are at Mortlake, but sometimes at other local cemeteries and crematoria. (The funeral director can advise on the options.) Catholics may opt for cremation provided the ashes are then buried reverently in consecrated ground in a way reflecting the dignity due to human remains as we await the resurrection.
- **When will the funeral take place?** This should be as soon as possible – as a mark of respect to the deceased. It is not helpful for the family to be worrying indefinitely about the funeral. Arrangements, unfortunately, can take a little longer in London, where funerals are often at least two or three weeks after the death. Where the funeral service takes the form of a Mass, this will be on a weekday morning on a date convenient to the family, funeral directors, church and cemetery/crematorium. Do not plan a date or time until you know that the priest is available.

Funeral Mass

The Mass is the Church's highest form of prayer; it is Christ's sacrifice upon the Cross offered for the repose of the soul of the deceased in which Christ Himself is made present in Holy Communion. A funeral Mass has a similar format to the parish Sunday Mass which Catholics are familiar with. The priest greets the coffin at the church door and sprinkles it with holy water. Mass then proceeds as normal. At the end of Mass there is a final commendation of the deceased before the coffin is sprinkled with holy water and incensed. Coffin and mourners then process out of church. Depending on the music chosen, a funeral Mass lasts around one hour. The priest accompanies the mourners to the committal.

Funeral Services

Other funeral services follow a similar format except there is no Eucharistic prayer nor Holy Communion, making them around 15-20 minutes shorter than a Mass. Crematoria operate to strict schedules and funeral services there must be kept to 30 minutes.

Planning the Service

While the funeral directors coordinate funeral arrangements generally, all details concerning the funeral service are made between the family and the parish priest. The priest will meet the family at the Parish House as soon as possible to discuss the details. He then provides an outline of what is agreed to form the basis of the funeral booklet. The funeral booklet is produced by the funeral director or the family themselves. The priest will check the booklet before it is printed to ensure everything is in the correct order.

Readings

All readings at the funeral service are taken from Scripture. For a funeral Mass, there must be a Gospel (read by the priest), a psalm (which can be said or sung) and one or two other readings from the Old and New Testaments (normally read by a family member or friend). The priest will assist with the choice of readings. A family member or friend may also read the Bidding Prayers/Prayers of the Faithful in which we pray for the deceased.

Eulogy

There may be one brief eulogy given by a family member or friend lasting less than 5 minutes (i.e. up to two sides of A4).

Music

As with the readings, the music should speak of our faith in the Resurrection. All music within the funeral service must be sacred music. (Secular/popular music is more appropriate for the reception/wake.)

The options in church are for hymns accompanied by an organist or a soloist/small group in the organ loft. These would normally be musicians familiar with the church set up and services here to ensure everything runs smoothly. The priest will liaise with the musicians. In choosing music, priority should be given to the parts of the Mass, hymns which speak of our hope of eternal life, and motets (especially during the offertory and Holy Communion) such as the *Ave Maria* and *Panis Angelicus*.

Streaming

Funerals are only streamed if specifically requested by the family. The church has its own YouTube channel – ‘Church of the Holy Ghost and St Stephen.’ The funeral appears live and is uploaded to be viewed subsequently. (Recordings are deleted after a short period of time.) The church can make no guarantees as to the streaming occurring nor its quality. For copyright reasons, streaming is not possible if there is recorded music.

Costs

There are certain unavoidable expenses relating to funerals. Having a Catholic funeral, however, does not add significantly to the expense. The church fee for conducting the funeral is, at the time of writing, £270. There is a separate fee for the musicians, if required. The funeral directors generally pay all individual bills relating to the funeral so the family have only to pay one account covering all the expenses.

Eternal rest grant unto him/her, O Lord; and let perpetual light shine upon him/her. May he/she rest in peace. May N.’s soul and the souls of all the faithful departed, through the mercy of God, rest in peace. Amen.

Fr. Mark Vickers
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