



## A PASTORAL LETTER ON CATHOLIC FUNERAL RITES

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ:

The Catholic Church has experience in helping people to prepare spiritually for death and assisting families to deal with the sickness, death, burial and bereavement of a loved one. Our priests and deacons have and will continue to serve all who approach them in their time of loss, regardless of a family's decisions regarding the care of their beloved dead. As St. Paul says, *"The life and death of each of us has its impact on others"* (Romans 14.7)

For some years now, attitudes toward death have undergone change. So too there have been notable changes in the thinking and reflection that is taking place among family members and in the Christian community.

Now, gathering the fruit of the Church's history, I offer thoughts, on a subject that affects us all, to the priests, deacons, grieving Catholic families, funeral directors and all Catholics in the Archdiocese of Ottawa who are touched by Catholic ministry to the bereaved.

Reading obituaries in our local newspapers, one soon realizes that there are evolving trends among our Catholic people. Some families leave aside traditional Catholic funeral rituals on the death of their loved ones, sometimes replacing them with a prayer service at the funeral home or a private graveside service, and sometimes having no service or time for prayer at all.

Frequently, we hear that an older person, who was always a faithful Roman Catholic, has been cremated and buried without any of the treasured prayers and rituals that sustained them throughout life. Obituaries now invite us to a funeral to "celebrate the life of our loved one" where there is

an expectation that someone will tell stories about the person who has died.

However, in this pastoral letter, I want to speak of the rich tradition of Catholic funeral rituals and encourage Catholics to make use of them. In this pastoral letter and the accompanying materials, I wish to offer guidance on church teaching and practices on some aspects of these concerns; my hope is that they will lead to thoughtful discussion within our families and in our parishes.

*“If we live, we live for the Lord; and if we die, we die for the Lord, so that alive or dead we belong to the Lord” (Romans 14.8)*

Most of us have a circle of belonging that includes persons with whom we share close relationships. We also belong to the family of God through our baptism, a relationship we live out in our parish. Through circumstances or by choice we may step away from either of these families. But we still belong—we are still called by name—and we have a place in the church. Yes, we always are a part of God’s own family, brothers and sisters in Jesus Christ.

There is one thing that is sure to cause sorrow – the suffering and death of a person we love. We want to do everything to alleviate or stop the suffering. Whether it comes slowly or swiftly, death demands our immediate attention, and draws on our strongest emotions.

We want to do the very best for this person we value. We want to call on God to receive the one who has died; and we also want to pay proper respect, to remember the good things of, to talk about, their contribution in the world and to express our love. At the same time, mourners need God’s consolation and hope.

*“We want to make sure you do not grieve like other people who have no hope” (1 Thessalonians 4:13)*

Truly it is in God’s Word that Christians discover true consolation and hope; for it is in God that we place our trust. Death always puts us face-to-face

with the ultimate mystery, and there we find that it is God who is the source of all life and meaning.

*“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 his paschal mystery of his blessed passion, resurrection from the dead and glorious ascension.” (Order of Christian Funerals, #1)*

The Church community accompanies each baptized Catholic with prayer. The parish community is prepared to help in many ways at the time of a loved one's death, accompanying those who have lost a close family member or friend and are grieving.

The Church has particular rituals for us in death: funeral rituals that begin with prayers at the time of death and, later, at the wake or vigil. They continue with the funeral Mass and come to their conclusion with the final farewell and committal or burial.

The purpose of the funeral ritual is not so much to celebrate the achievements of this person's life, or to recall their particular traits and preferences, as it is to tell of God's goodness and to give God thanks for the gift of life in Jesus Christ. It is within that framework that we consider the one who has died, and how we have experienced God's grace in that person's life.

Our Roman Catholic funeral rites offer us a treasury of spiritual riches to help us face the mystery of the death of loved ones and friends. The possibilities are abundant, allowing us to: offer worship, praise, and thanksgiving to God for the gift of a life which has now been returned to God; affirm the Church's belief in the sacredness of the human body and the resurrection of the dead; commend the dead to God's merciful love and plead for the forgiveness of their sins; bring hope and consolation to the living; renew our awareness of God's mercy and judgment and meet the human need to turn always to God in times of crisis; recall the importance of fraternity and solidarity even at the time of death; affirm and express the

union of the Church on earth with the church in heaven in the one great communion of saints.

Guidelines for funerals have been developed to help in the fulfillment of these purposes and are intended to guide the preparation of the prayers and various liturgies to accompany families in their time of difficulty by bringing them consolation and hope.

The gifts brought to the Christ Child by the Magi were gold, frankincense and myrrh. Gold to symbolize that Christ is the ruler of all creation, of all times and seasons. Frankincense denotes Christ's divinity and the priesthood which he exercised to win for us eternal life. And myrrh—a precious substance used in Jewish ritual to anoint bodies for burial—shows that Christ would be both king and divine high priest through his death and burial, the prelude to his resurrection, the source of our hope as Christians. May these truths and our Catholic funerals rituals be for us and our loved ones a source of hope and consolation.

Sincerely yours in Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Terrence Prendergast, SJ". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

+Terrence Prendergast, SJ  
Archbishop of Ottawa

The Solemnity of the Epiphany  
January 5, 2014