

# What May Happen at Roman Catholic Rituals of Mourning



Autism & Grief Project

Catholic faith rituals following a death will vary depending on the wishes of the deceased and their family's decisions. This guide describes what may take place at a Catholic wake, funeral, and burial service, as well as traditions that may be observed in the months and years following.

## The Wake

- The wake may be held at a funeral home or (more rarely) in the family's home, for one or two evenings. Sometimes there are two visiting times in one day.
- The deceased person's body will be lying in a casket at the front of the room. The casket will often (but not always) be open, and the person's body can be viewed.
- A kneeling stool may be set up in front of the casket so visitors can kneel and say a prayer for the deceased, if they want.
- Photographs of the deceased and flower arrangements may be placed around the room.
- The family may stand in a row near the casket to accept condolences from visitors who line up as they arrive to pay their respects.
- Many visitors may attend the wake to express their sadness and share memories of the deceased with the family.
- It is also possible for family members to arrange private time in the room with the casket, before or after visitors arrive.
- Sometimes an ordained member of the parish clergy (a priest, nun, or deacon) will attend the wake and lead a short prayer service.
- During the wake people may pray all or part of the rosary together.
- Sometimes people take a break and go into the lobby of the funeral home or outside for a short walk before returning to the wake.

- A eulogy (a formal presentation of memories by a family member or friend) might be said at the wake instead of at the end of the funeral mass that is to come. Sometimes a more formal service is held at the funeral home either during the wake or just prior to the funeral, led by ordained member of the clergy (often a Catholic priest, but not always).

## **The Funeral Service**

- The funeral mass may be held at a church, funeral home, or cemetery.
- A hearse (a black car that carries the now-closed casket) will transport the body from the funeral home to the church or cemetery. Family members often ride in cars that follow the hearse.
- The funeral mass may last about an hour. A eulogy may be given at the beginning or end of the mass.
- People may be in a more serious mood at a funeral mass than at a regular weekend mass.
- If the funeral is held in a church, the priest will usually meet the casket, which is carried by pallbearers, at the entrance to the church. The priest will say prayers, sprinkle holy water on the casket, and place a white cloth over the casket.
- The priest and casket then proceed up the aisle to the front of the sanctuary, followed by the family, who sit in the front pews.
- The casket will be placed in front of the altar. There may be a photograph of the deceased and flowers placed around the casket. Sometimes a Bible, rosary beads, or an item that was special to the person who died is placed on the casket.
- The funeral mass is similar to a Sunday mass, but a few parts will be different. The priest may approach the grieving family during the Exchange of Peace to shake hands or offer a hug.
- At the end of the funeral, the priest will usually walk in a circle around the casket distributing scented smoke with an incense burner—a sign of reverence. Special prayers for the person who died will be said. Pallbearers will pick up the casket and the family will follow the casket out of the church before everyone else.
- People will greet each other and chat as they leave the service.

- If there will be a burial service, mourners will then travel to the cemetery, often in a procession (a line of cars that drives slowly one behind the other, led by the hearse and followed by cars carrying the family). The cars often drive with their headlights on. They may be escorted by a police car which blocks traffic at intersections so the procession can move without interruption to the cemetery.

## **The Burial Service**

- There is not always a burial service. When there is, it is held at the cemetery.
- The casket will be positioned above a hole that has been dug in the ground.
- There may be photos of the deceased and flowers placed near the casket.
- Members of the immediate family usually sit in a row of chairs in front of the casket, to observe the burial ritual.
- When the event is over, people may be invited to a reception at the church hall or elsewhere, or close family and friends will drive to a restaurant to share a meal.

## **Later: Memorial Masses, Lighting Candles, and Visiting the Cemetery**

- Sometimes, family members or friends arrange for a memorial mass (a mass of remembrance), on the first anniversary of the loved one's death, or the birthday of the deceased, or any other meaningful date. A memorial mass is like any other mass, except the deceased is prayed for by name either at the beginning of the mass or during the intercessions (the prayers after the homily).
- In many Catholic churches, racks of devotional candles stand near the entrance. Visitors can light a candle in memory of a loved one whenever they wish.
- Family members and others may visit the cemetery anytime, and often bring flowers, or holiday arrangements. They may also place mementos or meaningful objects on the grave, such as a small American flag for a military veteran on the Fourth of July.