



## Catholic Funerals

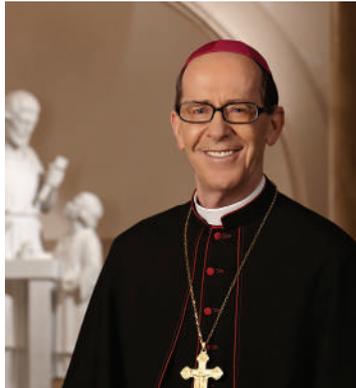
On the beauty of the Catholic Funeral Liturgy: Catechesis for adults.



Catholic Cemeteries & Funeral Homes

A Ministry of the Roman Catholic Diocese of Phoenix

Proclaiming the beauty of the Catholic Funeral Liturgy and Christian burial.



Dearly Beloved,

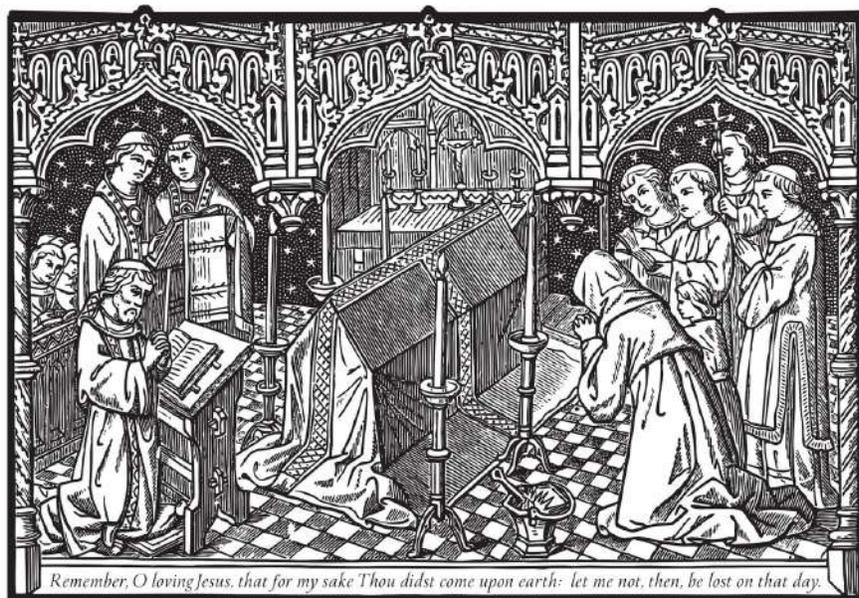
The Catholic Church has historically shown great reverence and compassion for those in the final stages of life, as well as caring for and supporting families who are mourning the loss of a loved one. In line with the Corporal Work of Mercy to bury the dead and care for the grieving, the Church shows a deep respect for the dignity of the body. As a temple of the Holy Spirit and because of our belief in the resurrection of the body and life everlasting, the final disposition of a person is a sacred matter. The burial or entombment of the deceased person's body or cremated remains is a testimony that those who have gone before us are treated with reverence as members of the Communion of Saints.

Catholic Cemeteries and Funeral Homes serve an important role in assuring that the faithful departed are treated in a loving and respectful manner as well as showing compassion for those who are grieving. Just as Christ was laid to rest in a tomb, our Catholic cemeteries are sacred places for laying to rest our loved ones. Catholic Cemeteries and Funeral Homes, through their spiritual atmosphere as well as regular Masses and prayers for the deceased, are a testimonial of our faith in eternal life. Not only will your departed loved ones be treated with the utmost of respect, but those who are grieving will be offered support during this very difficult time. I encourage you to entrust Catholic Cemeteries and Funeral Homes with your preplanning needs, as well as when experiencing the loss of a loved one.

Sincerely Yours in Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Thomas J. Olmsted".

Thomas J. Olmsted  
Bishop of Phoenix



*Nihil Obstat*  
Rev. Michael Diskin  
Assistant Chancellor  
November 2017

*Imprimatur*  
Most Rev. Thomas J. Olmsted  
Bishop of Phoenix  
November 2017

## Catholic Funerals

### Please read before the lesson to prepare

Nearly all adults will have attended a funeral or known someone who has passed away. It is likely they have experienced multiple types of funerals and may not immediately understand the traditions of the Catholic funeral.

Below are some Bible and Catechism quotes that will help you to prepare for this lesson.

### Bible Quotations

“By the sweat of your brow you shall eat bread, until you return to the ground, from which you were taken; For you are dust, and to dust you shall return.” – *Gen 3:19*

“But now made manifest through the appearance of our savior Christ Jesus, who destroyed death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel.” – *2 Tim 1:10*

“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in Him might not perish but might have eternal life.” – *John 3:16*

“Or are you unaware that we who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death? We were indeed buried with Him through baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might live in newness of life.” – *Romans 6:3-4*



### Catechism Quotations

CCC 1032 – “From the beginning the Church has honored the memory of the dead and offered prayers in suffrage for them, above all the Eucharistic sacrifice, so that, thus purified, they may attain the beatific vision of God. The Church also commends almsgiving, indulgences, and works of penance undertaken on behalf of the dead:

Let us help and commemorate them. If Job’s sons were purified by their father’s sacrifice, why would we doubt that our offerings for the dead bring them some consolation? Let us not hesitate to help those who have died and to offer our prayers for them.”

CCC 1055 – “By virtue of the ‘communion of saints,’ the Church commends the dead to God’s mercy and offers her prayers, especially the holy sacrifice of the Eucharist, on their behalf.”

CCC 1685 – “The different funeral rites express the Paschal character of Christian death and are in keeping with the situations and traditions of each region, even as to the color of the liturgical vestments worn.”

CCC 1686 – “The Order of Christian Funerals of the Roman liturgy gives three types of funeral celebrations, corresponding to the three places in which they are conducted (the home, the church, and the cemetery), and according to the importance attached to them by the family, local customs, the culture, and popular piety. This order of celebration is common to all the liturgical traditions and comprises four principal elements. [The Greeting of the Community, the Liturgy of the Word, the Eucharistic Sacrifice, and the Farewell]”

CCC 1689 – “The Eucharistic Sacrifice. When the celebration takes place in church the Eucharist is the heart of the Paschal reality of Christian death. In the Eucharist, the Church expresses her efficacious communion with the departed: offering to the Father in the Holy Spirit the sacrifice of the death and resurrection of Christ, she asks to purify his child of his sins and their consequences, and to admit him to the Paschal fullness of the table of the Kingdom. It is by the Eucharist thus celebrated that the community of the faithful, especially the family of the deceased, learn to live in communion with the one who ‘has fallen asleep in the Lord’ by communicating in the Body of Christ of which he is a living member and, then, by praying for him and with him.”

CCC 1690 – “A farewell to the deceased is his final ‘commendation to God’ by the Church. It is ‘the last farewell by which the Christian community greets one of its members before his body is brought to its tomb.’ The Byzantine tradition expresses this by the kiss of farewell to the deceased:

By this final greeting ‘we sing for his departure from this life and separation from us, but also because there is a communion and a reunion. For even dead, we are not at all separated from one another, because we all run the same course and we will find one another again in the same place. We shall never be separated, for we live for Christ, and now we are united with Christ as we go toward him . . . we shall all be together in Christ.”

### The Three Sacred Moments of a Catholic Funeral



**The Vigil.** The rite celebrated by the Christian community in the time following death and before the funeral liturgy. It is a time when loved ones show their respect and greet the family and friends of the deceased. It is also the most ideal time to share their memories of the deceased through a eulogy or video tribute, usually held at the funeral home the day before the Funeral Mass.



**Funeral Mass.** This is the central liturgical celebration held with the deceased’s body present at a church. Part of Catholic belief is that those who follow the way of Jesus shall forever be in Heaven, body and soul, in the presence of God. We believe in the bodily resurrection. Also, the Church honors the body because it has been the temple of the Holy Spirit. Therefore, the Church says that the body should be present at the funeral rites. If cremation is selected, the Church prefers that the body be present at the Mass.



**Rite of Committal.** This rite is the final act of our faith community in caring for the body of its deceased member. By our presence at this rite, we help the mourners face the end of one relationship with the deceased and the beginning of a new one based on prayerful remembrance, gratitude and the hope of resurrection and reunion. The celebration, whenever possible, takes place not in a cemetery chapel but at the open grave or place of interment. The act of committal expresses that the grave, once a sign of despair, is now, through Christ’s own death and Resurrection, a sign of hope and promise. The Church encourages all Catholics to seek out a Catholic Cemetery that has been blessed and consecrated as a final resting place.

## Opening Prayer

**The prayer said at the graveside, modify to suit your use as needed**

Lord Jesus Christ,  
by Your own three days in the tomb,  
You hallowed the graves of all who believe  
in You  
and so made the grave a sign of hope  
that promises resurrection  
even as it claims our mortal bodies.

Grant that our brothers and sisters may sleep  
here in peace  
until You awaken them to glory,  
for You are the resurrection and the life.  
Then they will see You face to face  
and in Your light will see light  
and know the splendor of God,  
for You live and reign forever and ever. Amen.

### 1) Proclamation

(From the Order of Christian Funerals) At the death of a Christian, whose life of faith was begun in the waters of baptism and strengthened at the eucharistic table, the Church intercedes on behalf of the deceased because of its confident belief that death is not the end nor does it break the bonds forged in life. The Church also ministers to the sorrowing and consoles them in the funeral rites with the comforting word of God and the sacrament of the eucharist.



### 2) Explanation

*See corresponding handouts from ACM “The Four Last Things” and “Catholic Funeral” to provide the central content of teaching.*

#### Teaching

##### Witness

- If appropriate, share a story of a funeral you attended, share what happened focusing on the two most important aspects,
  - 1) The dead was commended to the mercy of God.
  - 2) The grieving were consoled and given an opportunity to mourn the loss of their loved one.

##### Catechesis (main points to cover)

- Jesus loves us so much that He died to free us from sin and death. He wants us to live with Him and all the angels and saints forever in heaven.
- When someone dies, we have a special way of remembering and honoring them called a funeral which prepares the person who has died to enter into new and everlasting life with Jesus and helps the family mourn their loss.

- Cemeteries are permanent resting places for the bodies of the dead. They can be buried in the ground, interred in a mausoleum (an above ground tomb), or their cremated remains can be put in a columbarium (a small niche). It's customary that families visit the burial place of their dead loved ones on special anniversaries and All Souls Day or Día de los Muertos.
- Usually the funeral has three distinct parts.
  - 1) The Vigil
  - 2) The funeral liturgy
  - 3) The Rite of Committal
- We pray for our family and friends who have died hoping that they will experience the love and mercy of God, and we ask for their prayers and intercession to help us grow in holiness and to love God with all our hearts.
- We believe that we will be reunited with our family and friends and all those who are in heaven.

### 3) Application

#### Guided reflection and discussion

- What are some of the common ways people approach funerals today? (Attempt to show the challenges that we as a society have with funerals and treating the death of family member with respect)
  - Does it respect the dignity of the person?
  - Does it honor their baptism and desire to be in heaven?

- Does it provide the family with the opportunity to mourn properly?
- Why does the Church provide for three moments of the funeral rite?
- How is the funeral rite a fulfillment or completion of baptism?
- Key points to reinforce.
  - Honoring and burying or interring the dead is a duty of every Catholic.
  - The funeral commends the dead to the mercy of God.
  - The funeral provides consolation and healing for those who mourn.
  - The funeral includes the Vigil, Funeral Mass, and Committal (Burial).
  - Visiting the gravesite of family members who have passed away is a longstanding custom in the Church.
  - Recommended Video Resource: Fr. Mike Schmidt “The Real Purpose of Funerals” [ascensionpresents.com/video/the-real-purpose-of-funerals](http://ascensionpresents.com/video/the-real-purpose-of-funerals)



### 4) Celebration

Finish the lesson by reinforcing any key points and offering a concluding prayer inviting adults to pray for any family members who have died. Handout articles starting on page 34.

# THE CATHOLIC FUNERAL

*But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of deeds done by us in righteousness, but in virtue of his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal in the Holy Spirit, which he poured out upon us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that we might be justified by his grace and become heirs in hope of eternal life. ~ Titus 3:4-7*

**W**HEN A PARENT, spouse, child, sibling, or other family member, or a friend, neighbor, or colleague dies, we respond with grief or sorrow, and sometimes even with anger at their “leaving us.” The separation may involve acute loneliness, a sense of lost opportunities, a broken family circle, and a feeling of sadness that touches every part of life.

For the person who has no hope of life in Heaven, the sorrow can be crushingly bleak. The one who has died is never expected to be seen or heard again, and fond memories can be at best a band-aid on an open wound of the heart. But the Christian whose hope is in the Lord trusts in his promise of immortality. We can hope, with deep assurance, to see God ourselves one day and to meet again those whom we have loved in this life. The Catholic funeral liturgy is the expression of our firm faith in our Lord’s promise that he has prepared a place for us and will take us to himself (see Jn 14:2-3).

For the faithful Christian, death is the only door to eternal life. Although death would not have entered the world if our first parents had not sinned (see Wis 2:24; Rom 5:12), the saving acts of Jesus’ Paschal mystery have conquered death, making it not something to be feared but an event to be welcomed as the passage to eternal life, however difficult and painful that passage might be: *“O death, where is thy victory? O death, where is thy sting?”* (1 Cor 15:55).



DAVID CHARLES PHOTOGRAPHY

*“Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his”* (Rom 6:3-5). Christians do not see this life as “all there is,” *“[f]or here we have no lasting city, but we seek the city which is to come”* (Heb 13:14), the Heavenly Jerusalem. Living a life

***“The Christian whose hope is in the Lord trusts in his promise of immortality.”***

of faith and virtue, especially the virtue of charity, and receiving the sacraments worthily

are the preparation for entrance into glory.

In this life, we are as children in the womb of our Mother the Church. Death is birth into eternal life, and the Church accompanies us as we complete the process. At a Catholic funeral, Christ’s Paschal mystery is proclaimed, we are taught to remember the dead, we express our hope of being gathered together as God’s family in his Kingdom, we are encouraged to give witness by our lives to our faith as Christians, and we look for the fulfillment of God’s promises, when *“he will wipe away every tear from [our] eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain any more, for the former things have passed away”* (Rv 21:4).

A Catholic funeral consists of three parts: the Vigil for the Deceased, the funeral Mass, and the Committal. The Vigil for the Deceased can take place at the home

## *“Death is birth into eternal life.”*

of the deceased, a funeral home, or the church itself if well before the funeral Mass. The purpose of the vigil is to turn to God’s Word as our source of faith and hope in a time of loss. At the vigil, we the Christian community “keeps watch” with the family in prayer, and find strength in our communal prayer. We seek God’s mercy for the deceased, and we receive consolation from God’s presence. Most of all, we express our belief in eternal life and in the resurrection of the body. One of the prayers during the vigil reads as follows:

“Lord our God, the death of our brother/sister N. recalls our human condition and the brevity of our lives on earth. But for those who believe in your love death is not the end, nor does it destroy the bonds that you forge in our lives. We share the faith of your Son’s disciples and the hope of the children of God. Bring the light of Christ’s Resurrection to this time of testing and pain as we pray for N. and for those who love him/her, through Christ our Lord” (*Order of Christian Funerals* 72).

The funeral Mass is the most significant celebration of the Christian community for the deceased. The most prominent themes of the liturgy are those of Christ’s Resurrection, when he defeated sin and death, commending the deceased to God’s mercy, and seeking strength for ourselves in Christ’s Paschal mystery. We recall how we share in Christ’s death and Resurrection through our Baptism and look forward to our own resurrection, and we express hope that we will all be united in God’s Kingdom. One of the Opening Prayers reads as follows:

“O God, to whom mercy and forgiveness belong, hear our prayers on behalf of your servant N., whom you have called out of this world; and because he/she put his/her hope and trust in you, command that he/she be carried safely home to Heaven and come to enjoy your eternal reward” (*Order of Christian Funerals* 160).

The selection of readings — one from the Old Testament, a Psalm, a reading from the New Testament other than the Gospel, and the Gospel — should reflect the themes described above, and the hymns and songs should be carefully chosen as well. Neither ornate homilies nor extended eulogies are permissible, for the funeral is not intended to showcase the deceased’s life but to “illumine the mystery of Christian death in the light of the risen Christ” (CCC 1688).



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At the conclusion of the Mass, there is a final commendation. In the invitation to prayer, the celebrant says: “Before we go our separate ways, let us take leave of our brother/sister. May our farewell express our affection for him/her; may it ease our sadness and strengthen our hope. One day we shall joyfully greet him/her again when the love of Christ, which conquers all things, destroys even death itself” (*Order of Christian Funerals* 171). He then prays over the deceased: “Into your hands, Father of mercies, we commend our brother/sister N. in the sure and certain hope that, together with all who have died in Christ, he/she will rise with him on the last day. Merciful Lord, turn toward us and listen to our prayers: open the gates of paradise to your servant and help us who remain to comfort one another with assurances of faith, until we all meet in Christ and are with you and with our brother/sister for ever. We ask this through Christ our Lord” (*Order of Christian Funerals* 175).

The third part of a Catholic funeral, the Committal, takes place at the cemetery or other location

*“The funeral Mass is the most significant celebration of the Christian community for the deceased.”*



*Resurrection, by James Tissot, 1856-1902*

where the body of the deceased is interred. (Options other than interment are permissible in appropriate circumstances, such as burial at sea.) The sure hope of the resurrection of the body is expressed when the celebrant prays: “Because God has chosen to

call our brother/sister N. from this life to himself, we commit his/her body to the earth, for we are dust and unto dust we shall return. But the Lord Jesus Christ will change our mortal bodies to be like his in glory, for he is risen, the firstborn from the dead. So let us commend our brother/sister to the Lord, that the Lord may embrace him/her in peace and raise up his/her body on the last day” (*Order of Christian Funerals* 219). The Church reverences the body even after death, because we as human beings are a body-soul composite and we await the glorification of the body when it is rejoined to the soul after its resurrection. For this reason, the Church prefers interment of the intact body. It permits cremation only when the purpose is not opposed to the teachings of the Church, and in no cases is “scattering of the ashes” permitted, however reverently this might be done.

The grief of the bereaved is also acknowledged at the Committal when the celebrant prays: “Merciful Lord, you know the anguish of the sorrowful, you are attentive to the prayers of the humble. Hear your people who cry out to you in their need, and strengthen their hope in your lasting goodness. We ask this through Christ our Lord” (*Order of Christian Funerals* 223). The Committal concludes with the celebrant praying: “Eternal rest grant unto him/her, O Lord,” to which those gathered respond: “And let perpetual light shine upon him/her.” The priest continues: “May he/she rest in peace,” to which those gathered respond, “Amen.” The priest concludes: “May his/her soul and the souls of all the faithful departed, through the mercy of God, rest in peace,” to which everyone again responds, “Amen” (*Order of Christian Funerals* 223).

(CCC 1680-1690)

# The Four Last Things: Death, Judgment, Heaven, and Hell

*And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt. ~ Daniel 12:2*

**B**ECAUSE OF THE BUSYNESS OF OUR LIVES, and the speed with which the world around us moves, it is somehow possible for us to spend all our time caught up in our everyday joys, sorrows, concerns, and work, without ever thinking about those things which are most important in life. Why are we here? How are we to find true fulfillment in life? What happens after we die? Throughout history Christians have seen great value in remaining focused completely on Christ, and it is impossible to be focused on Christ without pondering these ultimate questions.

The Church has constantly encouraged us to prayerfully ponder the inescapable realities of death, personal judgment, and Heaven and Hell. These things are of *the greatest significance* and have traditionally been called the four last things.

## Death: An Event Shrouded in Mystery

*"Therefore as sin came into the world through one man and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all men sinned" (Rom 5:12).*

One thing that is certain in life is that there will be death. It is inevitable. Yet if our first parents had not sinned, death would not be our lot. God had commanded Adam to avoid only one desirable thing, *"for in the day that you eat of it you shall die"* (Gn 2:17). Yet Adam and Eve, seduced by the serpent who told them that God had lied to them (see Gn 3:4), ate the forbidden fruit and, as a result, death entered the world: *"you are dust, and to dust you shall return"* (Gn 3:19).

At some point in time, our lives will end, and

the world as we know it will fall away. But what happens after we die? Do we cease to exist and fall into eternal nothingness or is there something else, something greater and even more vast on the other side of death? Human beings, left to their own reason, cannot find an answer to this question. Death is perhaps the greatest of mysteries. It is the question that is perhaps closest to the human heart, because the truth about death closely concerns us all.

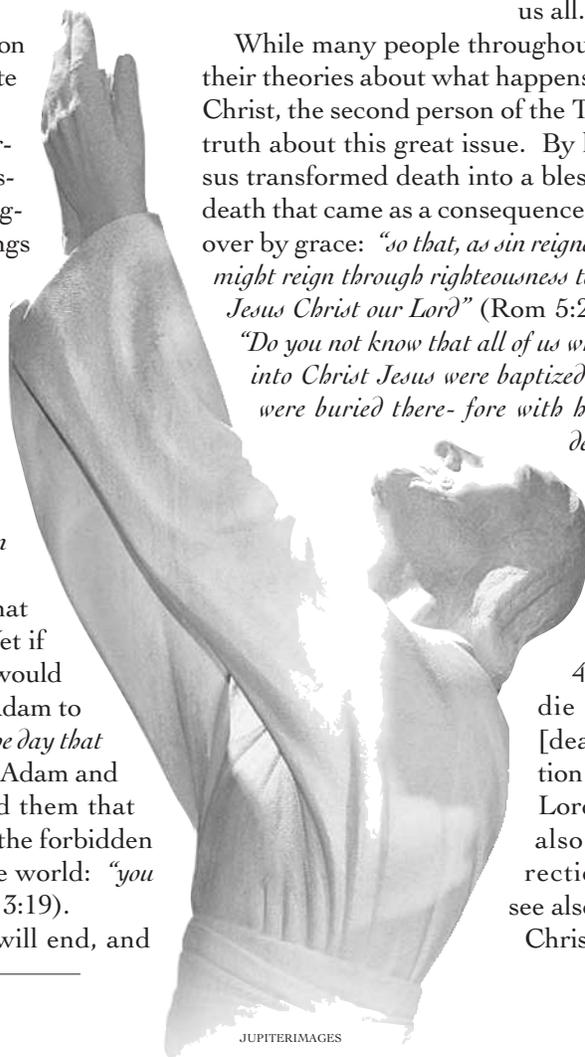
*"By his own death, Jesus transformed death into a blessing."*

While many people throughout history have had their theories about what happens after death, Jesus Christ, the second person of the Trinity, revealed the truth about this great issue. By his own death, Jesus transformed death into a blessing. The curse of death that came as a consequence of sin is now taken over by grace: *"so that, as sin reigned in death, grace also might reign through righteousness to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord"* (Rom 5:21). St. Paul asks, *"Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, so that as Christ*

*was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life"* (Rom 6:3-4).

"For those who die in Christ's grace [death] is a participation in the death of the Lord, so that they can also share his Resurrection"<sup>1</sup> (CCC 1006; see also 1 Cor 15:21).

Christian death, then, is



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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Romans 6:3-9; Philippians 3:10-11



*Jesus as Judge, 12th century carved ivory panel*

a consoling positive reality; we do not have to die alone. The baptized Christian knows that his or her life belongs to Christ and that death is the physical completion of the “dying with Christ” that began at Baptism. Jesus opens up his own death to allow us to die with him; his obedience and love to God the Father can become our obedience: *“For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life”* (Rom 5:10).

It is in dying and departing from this world that the Christian becomes fully incorporated into the redeeming death of Jesus Christ and reaches out in hope towards the promised final home in Heaven: *“If, because of one man’s trespass, death reigned through that one man, much more will those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man Jesus Christ”* (Rom 5:17).

While death will always remain shrouded in mystery, the teaching of Christ gives us firm hope and assurance in preparing for our own death and in coping

with the death of those we love. Many people today stand panicked and helpless in the face of death. It seems such loss and a great uncertainty. It is difficult enough dealing with the loss of one we love, but it is devastating to face death without a deep faith in God and some understanding of the last things. *“When the perishable puts on the imperishable, and the mortal puts on immortality, then shall come to pass the saying that is written: ‘Death is swallowed up in victory. O death, where is thy victory? O death, where is thy sting?’”* (1 Cor 15:54-55).

### **Death: What we Learn from the Funeral Vigil Liturgy**

It has been the case since the earliest days of Christianity that in order to know what Christians believe, we should pay attention to their prayers. The Church prays what she believes. What follows are some of the prayers contained in the liturgy of the funeral vigil, the prayer service the night before the funeral. The prayers shed light on the meaning of Christian death.

At the beginning of the liturgy, during the Invitation to Prayer, the celebrant prays, “My brothers and sisters, we believe that all the ties of friendship and affection which knit us as one throughout our lives do not unravel with death” (*Order of Christian Funerals* 71). The bonds of love which unite members of a family or one friend to another remain strong even after a person dies. The celebrant continues, “Confident that God always remembers the good we have done and forgives our sins, let us pray, asking God to gather N. to himself” (*Order of Christian Funerals* 72). This prayer clearly sets forth a proper Christian mindset in the face of death. While it is true that *“the wages of sin is death”*, Jesus by his death conquered death and extends to every person *“the free gift of God [which] is eternal life”* (Rom 6:23). “Lord,” the Church prays, “for your faithful people life is changed, not ended. When the body of our earthly dwelling lies in death we gain an everlasting dwelling place in Heaven”<sup>2</sup> (CCC 1012). We are pilgrims on earth because our true homeland is in Heaven. The Christian stares into the grave not only confident that the Lord is calling his loved one home but also assured that he will see these very bones resurrected into a glorified body on the last day. Jesus won the victory over death. Without the Resurrection Jesus’ death on the cross would be a sign of failure and defeat to us. But he has arisen and so we glory in the triumph of the cross and look with eyes of faith and

<sup>2</sup> *Roman Missal*, Preface of Christian Death I

hope past the tomb to the eternal life he promised.

The Church never tires in her work to bring all peoples back into the family of God and so especially at death she commends them to the Father's love and mercy with the following prayer:

Go forth, Christian soul, from this world  
in the name of God the almighty Father,  
who created you,  
in the name of Jesus Christ, the Son of the living God,  
who suffered for you,  
in the name of the Holy Spirit,  
who was poured out upon you...  
May you return to [your Creator]  
who formed you from the dust of the earth.  
May holy Mary, the angels, and all the saints  
come to meet you as you go forth ...  
May you see your Redeemer face to face  
(CCC 1020).<sup>3</sup>

### The Particular Judgment and The Last Judgment

*"When the Son of man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne. Before him will be gathered all the nations, and he will separate them one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and he will place the sheep at his right hand, but the goats at the left. Then the King will say to those at his right hand, 'Come, O blessed of my Father, inherit the Kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food ...' Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when did we see thee hungry and feed thee, or thirsty and give thee drink?... ' And the King will answer them, 'Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me.' Then he will say to those at his left hand,*

***"There is no joy more complete, no love more rapturous, no life more fulfilling."***



*The Death of St. Joseph, by Jacob Walch, 1440-1516*

*"Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; for I was hungry and you gave me no food ... " Then they also will answer; "Lord, when did we see thee hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not minister to thee?" Then he will answer them, "Truly, I say to you, as you did it not to one of the least of these, you did it not to me." And they will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life" (Mt 25:31-46).*

This parable, taken from the New Testament, describes judgment in terms of the final encounter with Christ when he returns at the end of time. "He will come again to judge the living and the dead," we say in the Creed. Such a right the Father gave to him because he suffered death on the cross for our sins. On the last day, Jesus will return as this parable describes and all the dead will be raised, "those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of judgment" (Jn 5:29). This event is called the Last Judgment and will mark the end of time and the coming of the Kingdom of God

in its fullness. All those who have died in Christ will be given back their own bodies transformed and glorified, and will enter into the fullness of God's Kingdom in Heaven.

Jesus not only speaks about the Last Judgment but also about the judgment that immediately follows death. He tells a story about the rich man who, when he died, was punished for his lack of charity toward the poor man Lazarus (see Lk 16:19-31). This story illustrates that at death our lives will be laid bare and we will be judged on our love. This immediate judgment the Church has commonly called the *particular judgment* because it is given individually to each person at death. It is not meant to scare us

<sup>3</sup> *Order of Christian Funerals, Prayer of Commendation*

but to awaken in us the responsibility we have for our neighbor. And it calls to mind the need for our faith to bear fruit because faith without works is dead (see Jas 2:17).

### Heaven: Life in Pure Love

*“In my Father’s house are many rooms; if it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And when I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also” (Jn 14:2-3).*

God created us out of his great love so that we might eventually be able to share in his very life. He wants us to share in the deep life of communion that exists between the divine persons of the Trinity. There is no joy more complete, no love more rapturous, no life more fulfilling. Entrance into Heaven will be the experience of entering into the perfect love that exists between the Persons of the Trinity. Trinitarian love is total. It holds nothing back. It is the full giving of self, out of love for the other. If we could imagine our most exhilarating moment of love and joy experienced on this earth, this moment is but a tiny taste of the infinite love and joys of Heaven and the ecstasy that participation in Trinitarian love will bring us. Jesus instituted the Church in order to shower us with sanctifying grace through the sacraments — grace which would make us holy and make us partakers of divine love and Trinitarian life. In God we will find true happiness; he is our final beatitude because our natural desire for happiness will be fulfilled. “Whoever sees God has obtained all the goods of which he can conceive”<sup>4</sup> (CCC 2548).

While it is true that every human being was created to spend eternity in Heaven, not everyone goes there. Who then goes to Heaven? Only a person who dies in God’s grace, free from any mortal sin, is able to go to Heaven. A person must also have been perfectly purified from the effects of sin in order to enter Heaven (see Rv 21:27). This purification can happen here on earth or in Purgatory (see handout on Purgatory). Why must a person be free from mortal sin and also free from the stains of that sin to enter Heaven? Sin is, by its very nature, a rejection of God. If a person dies having rejected God, God will honor his or her free choice. He will not force us to love him — we must freely choose to love him and live in obedience to

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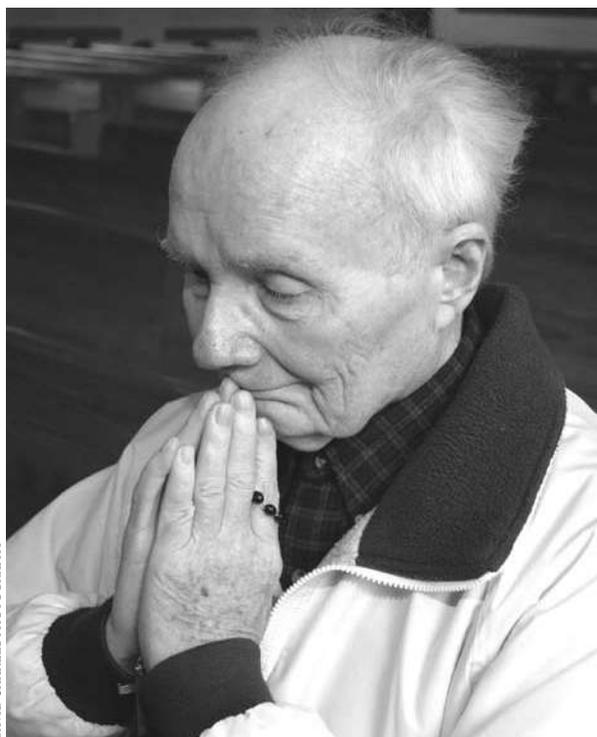
his holy will. The damage left by sin leaves us marred and incomplete; because of sin we are not wholly ourselves.

In order to be united to God in Heaven, we must be entirely ready to greet him, with our whole being, free of all stain or wrinkle. Therefore, the damage caused by sin must be atoned for and made right, and only when a person is perfectly pure of heart will he be able to see God (see Mt 5:8). Every trial, every suffering, every moment of life provides us with the opportunity to be perfected in love. If we make our lives an effort at learning sacrificial, Christ-like love, and if we stay close to the sacraments that give us the power to be truly transformed in love, we will be made perfect. We will enter Heaven and our deepest longings will be satisfied.

### Hell: Eternal Separation from the Trinity

*“The Son of man will send his angels, and they will gather out of his Kingdom all causes of sin and all evildoers, and throw them into the furnace of fire; there men will weep and gnash their teeth. Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the Kingdom of their Father” (Mt 13:41-43).*

God loves us so immeasurably and wants us to spend life everlasting with him in Heaven, but he does



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<sup>4</sup> St. Gregory of Nyssa, De beatitudinibus 6 from J.P. Migne, ed., Patrologia Graeca 44, 1265A (Paris: 1857-1866)



*The Peaceful Death of the Just, 19th century lithograph*

not force us to love him. He wants us to spend eternity with him — but the choice is ours. We have the chance to turn to Jesus while we are alive, but at the moment of death, our choice is frozen, suspended forever in time (see CCC 1021). We either die in friendship with the Lord or we die out of his grace, in persistent rejection of his love to the end. A person who dies in a state of mortal sin has made a tragic, yet free choice — and will spend eternity separated from God by his or her own choice.

Hell is a place of unimaginable pain and suffering. In the Gospels, Jesus uses a straightforward realism in describing the pain of Hell. He describes it as a place of consuming fire and eternal anguish (see Mt 13:42, 50; Mk 9:43, 48; Rv 21:8). It is the dwelling place of Satan, the fallen angels (called demons), and all those who have rebelled against God.

The greatest suffering that the souls in Hell experience is the pain of being eternally separated from God (see 2 Thes 1:9). The Church has traditionally called this punishment the “pain of loss.” While on earth, it is possible for us to numb our desire for God by acquiring worldly things and focusing on earthly pleasures. When we die, these things can no longer satisfy us. Sin will have lost its appeal and the pleasures we had thought so enticing will be seen in all their emptiness. We will be confronted with the fact that our souls were made for God — and it is God, who through our free choices during life, we have rejected. The person in Hell, through his or

her own choice, will have lost God who is perfect peace, love, and joy — and this loss will cause everlasting torment.

### **Jesus Christ: Our Just and Merciful Judge**

Knowing what we know about the judgment that each of us will face when we die, knowing something about the life of hatred and despair which consumes the souls in Hell, as well as the joys of Trinitarian love in Heaven, we must throw ourselves on the mercy of Jesus. It is Christ who is our Judge — and his judgment is just (see 2 Pt 2:4-7, 9). Every offense against God, every offense against our neighbor will be recalled, and an account must be given: *“Fear God, and keep his commandments; for this is the whole duty of man. For God will bring every deed into judgment, with every secret thing, whether good or evil”* (Eccl 12:13-14). However, if we have sought his mercy and forgiveness, our sins will be cast aside. Our Lord is just, but he is also full of mercy and compassion. He forgives us our sins and offenses, if we repent. If we stray away from him, he waits for us with open arms, calling us gently back into an intimate and loving relationship. He constantly calls. He never ceases offering us his mercy. He wants to spend eternal life with us. If we wait until tomorrow to turn to him and give him our hearts, we may have waited too long. *“Behold, now is the acceptable time; behold now is the day of salvation”* (2 Cor 6:2).

(CCC 678-682, 1005-1014, 1020-1029, 1033-1041, 2548)

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