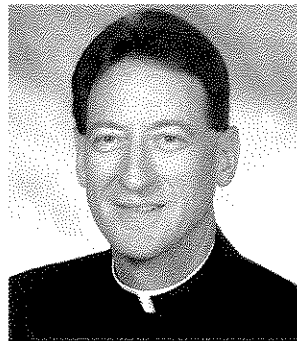


# Are Catholic Funerals Relevant to Catholics Today?

— by Reverend Stephen J. Bird

“Secularism has led to the degradation of burial traditions,” he said. “We’re having to deal with the issues of a disposable society.”

*A POINT TO PONDER!*



Reverend Stephen J. Bird

## Are Catholic Funerals Relevant to Catholics Today?

When I am travelling, I often read the newspaper *USA Today*. An article in the May 4, 2007, issue of that paper caught my eye. This article originally appeared in *The Arizona Republic* and was about funerals in Phoenix.

The article told about a variety of interesting services. “Craig Hansen once recreated a casino inside his Phoenix funeral home where mourners, in honor of the departed, played slot machines. The idea was to create the noise and activity of gambling, and the money dropped into the slots went to the deceased’s favorite charity. At another farewell, the funeral director simulated a campsite because the deceased loved to camp. The director pitched a tent and brought in a faux fire.” The article went on to say, “Changing attitudes about death and dying have contributed to how a person is remembered.”

In my own experience, I am occasionally invited to attend a funeral at a church that is not Catholic. What seems to be popular now in other churches is a lengthy video production showing photos from the life of the deceased, accompanied by recorded music.

✦ Sometimes, it seems as if the service is all about the person who died and has little to do with what God has done and is doing. Here is another trend: the body is frequently buried in a private, family ceremony, prior to the funeral service.

In both Catholic and non-Catholic circles, we have seen a great increase in the use of cremation in recent years. I will look at cremation later.

But first, let us go back in time. Think about the way that great Egyptian leaders were buried: their bodies mummified and elaborate tombs built. Even though we might call them pagan, they certainly had some idea about the importance of the body and some idea about an afterlife.

In our own day, we get a sense of the importance of the body when there is an accident or disaster. Often, heroic efforts are made to recover the body of a drowning victim, the victims of a plane crash or disappearance, and the victims of a coal mining accident such as the recent mine collapse in Utah.

The early Christians built upon the Jewish and pagan traditions of burying the body. The Catholic Church has a rich tradition, centuries old, when it comes to both caring for the dying person and caring for the person after

death. And of course, we are also concerned about the family and friends of the deceased person.

If those who are not Christians go to great lengths to care for the deceased, there is all the more reason for us, as Christians, to care for those who have died.

St. Augustine (who lived in the last half of the 4th century and the beginning of the 5th century) said,

“The bodies of our deceased must not be treated lightly or disregarded, particularly the bodies of the faithful or of virtuous men; for these bodies were used by their souls in a holy manner as instruments and agents for the performance of all their good works. Now if they who do not believe in the resurrection of the flesh are so anxious about the care of the physical body, how much greater should be our concern, we who do believe!

May our tender care for the body of our deceased which is destined, as we know, for an eternal resurrection be, then, a manifestation of the faith and love within us.”

I believe that what St. Augustine spoke about sixteen centuries ago is very relevant today. We need to rediscover the richness of what the Catholic Church offers in its current ritual. While some Catholics are asking to add various elements that they have observed in non-Catholic or non-religious funeral services, I believe that, instead, we need to explore what the Catholic ritual already provides.

We can not change the Church’s ritual. However, the Church recognizes that we live in an era when personal choice is important. So, the Church provides us with many options within the structure of the funeral rites. At a time of emotional stress, such as the death of a loved one, we need (and often yearn for) signs of stability that help anchor us as we face an uncertain future.

*continued on page 20*

Families do not have to “invent” a ceremony from scratch. We are given a structure, which we can adapt to our particular circumstances. This is a gift from the Church. And, if the rituals are done well and the various options utilized, I have found they can be very relevant to those of us who live in the 21st century.

The name of our current Catholic ritual is *Order of Christian Funerals (OCF)*. It is called an “Order” because it contains many options from which to choose. Some of these options can be led by a parish leader, a volunteer, a family member, a member of the funeral home staff, or a cemetery employee.

Before a person dies, there are prayers for the dying. Immediately after death, there are comforting prayers for the deceased and the family. There are optional prayers to be used when the family first gathers in the presence of the body. We have a short and beautiful ritual that can be used before the body is transferred to the Church. Provisions are made for Morning Prayer or Evening Prayer if these seem appropriate. But the three principal times of prayer are the Vigil for the Deceased (which we sometimes call the “wake service”), the Funeral Liturgy (usually a Mass), and the Rite of Committal that takes place at the cemetery. I will look more closely at these three services: the Vigil, the Funeral, and the Committal.

The ritual says, “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.” (OCF #1) “Catholic funeral rituals express our continuing love and care for the deceased, and these rituals can begin that inward letting go which will hand over the deceased to God’s mercy. These same rituals seek also to help us put our own lives back together again with new hope for the future.” (*Life is Changed Not Ended, part 2, FDLC*)

I recently spoke with several of the funeral directors in my hometown. I asked them what they noticed about our Catholic funerals that set them apart and were helpful to the family. One thing mentioned that we do well is that we have the presence of the community. A group of parishioners often come to participate in the funeral services even if they do not know the deceased. Some parishes have “funeral choirs,” made up of retired parishioners or others who are available during the daytime. This is the way it should be in a parish community as we minister to one another.

The way we use music was also mentioned by one of the funeral directors as something that added richness and reverence to our Catholic services. We do not simply listen to music, we participate by singing.

*Our selection of music is perhaps the most important decision we make.*

Of course, music needs to be carefully planned. In the section on music, the ritual says, “Music is integral to the funeral rites. It allows the community to express convictions and feelings that words alone may fail to convey. It has the power to console and uplift the mourners and to strengthen the unity of the assembly in faith and love.” (OCF 30) I think our selection of music is perhaps the most important decision we make among the many choices in preparing the various rites.

### Vigil for the Deceased

As I continue to explore the funeral rites, I would invite you to think about the power of music. When my mother died about four years ago, we began the Vigil for the Deceased with a hymn not usually associated with a funeral: “For the Beauty of the Earth.” All the verses are appropriate, but I chose the hymn especially because of verses 1 and 4.

### *For the Beauty of the Earth*

(1) *For the beauty of the earth,  
For the glory of the skies,  
For the love which from our birth  
Over and around us lies:  
(Refrain) Lord of all, to You we raise  
This our hymn of grateful praise.*  
(4) *For the joy of human love,  
Brother, sister, parent, child,  
Friends on earth and friends above;  
For all gentle thoughts and mild:*

Text: Folliot S. Pierpont

Tune: Conrad Kocher and William H. Monk

With this opening hymn, combined with some carefully selected scripture readings, comforting words from the deacon, and some stories and reflections shared by several friends and relatives, our family felt the joy of God’s love for my mother. We were reminded of the promise of eternal life given to my mother at her Baptism.

Earlier, I mentioned how videos have become popular in many non-Catholic churches. At the time of death, there is certainly a desire to reminisce about the life of the person who died. I find the Vigil service is the perfect time for family members and friends to share stories and remembrances. While the Vigil can be celebrated at a funeral home, in my area we often celebrate the Vigil at the church. When the Vigil is celebrated at church, we frequently use the parish hall afterwards as a place for people to visit while sharing some refreshments. Photos, mementos, and even videos of the deceased are certainly appropriate in the parish hall.

### Funeral Liturgy

Moving on to the Funeral Liturgy (usually a Mass), I go back to some comments by one of our local funeral directors. He felt there was great value to the structure of our Catholic service. People know what to expect. This funeral director noticed that in some other churches, the ministers seem to deal solely with the emotional aspects of death. In contrast, he sees how our Catholic service always deals with the

reality of death and always goes back to the Christian meaning of life, death, and the hope of resurrection.

Once again, music can play an important role in comforting the family, friends, and the community at the time of loss. The hymn "We Shall Rise Again" by Jeremy Young is somewhat long, but the verses are excellent, based on scripture, and reinforce our Christian understanding of death.

#### *We Shall Rise Again*

(1) *Come to Me, all you weary,  
with your burdens and pain.  
Take My yoke on your shoulders  
and learn from Me;  
I am gentle and humble,  
and your souls will find rest,  
For My yoke is easy  
and My burden is light.*

#### *(Refrain)*

*We shall rise again on the last day  
with the faithful, rich and poor.  
Coming to the house of Lord Jesus,  
we will find an open door there,  
we will find an open door.*

(2) *Though we walk through  
the darkness,  
evil we do not fear.  
You are walking beside me  
with Your rod and Your staff.  
Only goodness and kindness  
follow us all our lives.  
We shall dwell in the Lord's house  
for so many years to come!*

(3) *We depend on God's mercy,  
mercy which never fades.  
We remember our covenant  
and the promise Jesus made:  
If we die with Christ Jesus,  
we shall live with Him,  
And if we are faithful,  
we shall reign with Him!*

(4) *Do not fear death's dominion,  
look beyond earth and grave.  
See the brightness of Jesus  
shining out to light our way.*

*Loving Father and Spirit,  
loving Jesus the Son,  
All God's people together,  
we shall live on as one!*

(5) *At the door there to greet us,  
martyrs, angels, and saints,  
and our family and loved ones,  
ev'ry one freed from their chains.  
We shall feel their acceptance,  
and the joy of new life.  
We shall join in the gathering,  
reunited in God's love.*

*Words and music by Jeremy Young.  
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### *Music has the power to console and uplift.*

I think this is an example of what I quoted earlier from the Funeral ritual. Music "allows the community to express convictions and feelings that words alone may fail to convey. It has the power to console and uplift the mourners and to strengthen the unity of the assembly in faith and love." (OCF #30)

We have an opportunity to use special music during various seasons of the Church year: Advent, Christmas, Lent, and Easter. An opening hymn such as "Hark! The Herald Angels Sing" can work well for a funeral during the Christmas season. This season extends from Christmas through the Sunday after Epiphany. Think of the words:

*Hark the Herald Angels Sing  
Born that we no more may die,  
Born to raise us from the earth,  
born to give us second birth.  
Hark! The herald angels sing,  
"Glory to the newborn King."*

The hymn "Alleluia! Alleluia!" used during Easter season has these words:

*We with Him to life eternal  
By His resurrection rise.*

Years ago, I was called to the hospital after the death of a baby due to Sudden Infant Death Syndrome. It was the couple's first child and they were devastated. The only request they had for the funeral Mass was the song "On Eagle's Wings." After the funeral, they took some time off from work and spent a week in Colorado. While there, they found an artist who drew an adult eagle and a baby eagle in flight. When they showed it to me, they said it reminded them of how God was taking care of their child, Elizabeth.

Music can indeed be powerful.

We also need to educate our people about the symbols used for a funeral and make full use of these symbols - the funeral pall, the paschal candle, holy water, incense. A cross or a Bible may be placed on the coffin.

One of the funeral directors applauded the way we try to involve friends and family members during our Catholic services. He said this does not happen as much in other churches. The family is made to feel a part of the service.

Friends and family can place the funeral pall over the casket, proclaim the scriptures, carry up the bread and wine at the beginning of the Liturgy of the Eucharist, and serve as ushers and altar servers. Qualified persons can help distribute Holy Communion.

### *Within the Funeral Ritual, there are so many options.*

Within the Funeral Ritual, there are so many options. How many of you know that the priest has about fifty choices for the opening prayer? In addition to the general options, there are prayers for a child, a young person, a parent, a married couple, a deceased non-Christian married to a Catholic, one who died after a long illness, one who died accidentally or violently, one who died by suicide and more.

*continued on page 22*


Here is one of the general prayers:

*Holy Lord, almighty God,  
hear our prayers for Your servant  
Virginia, whom you have summoned  
out of this world.  
Forgive her sins and failings and  
grant her a place of refreshment,  
light and peace.*

*Let her pass unharmed through the  
gates of death to dwell with the blessed  
in light as You promised to Abraham  
and his children forever.*

*Accept Virginia into Your safekeeping  
and on the great day of judgment  
raise her up with all the saints  
to inherit Your eternal kingdom.  
We ask this through Christ our Lord.  
Amen. (OCF #398-3)*

As the Mass continues, we hear the comforting words from Sacred Scripture. The Ritual offers over fifty selections from the Old and New Testament.


 One of the most difficult portions of the funeral for priests or deacons is the homily. It is not supposed to be a eulogy. This is what the ritual says:

*"A brief homily based on the readings  
should always be given at the funeral  
liturgy, but never any kind of eulogy.  
The homilist should dwell on God's  
compassionate love and on the paschal  
mystery of the Lord as proclaimed in  
the Scripture readings. Through the  
homily, the community should receive  
the consolation and strength to face  
the death of one of its members with  
a hope that has been nourished by  
the proclamation of the saving word  
of God." (OCF #141)*

With careful preparation, I think the homilist can talk about what God does for all of us and how God's love was present in the life of the deceased.

But, there is a place in the liturgy for more personal remarks. The ritual suggests, "Following the prayer after

communion, a member or a friend of the family may speak in remembrance of the deceased before the final commendation begins." (OCF #170)

 Careful instructions should be given to the person who will speak about the deceased. They should not declare that the deceased person is already in heaven. I also recommend that the comments be written out and somewhat brief. Again, these comments come at the end of the Mass, before the final commendation.

After the Liturgy of the Word, we turn for spiritual nourishment to the table of the Eucharist. This is a foretaste of the heavenly banquet that is to come. "In partaking of the body [and blood] of Christ, all are given a foretaste of eternal life in Christ and are united with Christ, with each other, and with all the faithful, living and dead." (OCF #143)

At the end of the Mass, we have the Final Commendation and Farewell as we entrust the deceased to the tender and merciful embrace of God. The Ritual emphasizes that the "Song of Farewell" is the climax of the rite of final commendation. It "should affirm hope and trust in the paschal mystery." (OCF #147)

Since the "Song of Farewell" is to be the climax, I believe it is especially important that everyone participate. I elicit participation by saying something like this: "Now, I ask everyone to please join in our final prayer for James. You can find the prayer in our hymnal, number such and such. Let us all pray for James as we sing." This is the time for the priest to incense the body while everyone is singing the hymn.

One easy version of the "Song of Farewell" is set to the same tune as "Praise God From Whom All Blessings Flow." Here are the words:

#### *Song of Farewell*

*(1) Come to her aid, O saints of God;  
Come meet her angels of the Lord*

*(Refrain)*

*Receive her soul, O holy ones;  
Present her now to God, Most High.*

*(2) May Christ who called you,  
take you home,  
And angels lead you to Abraham.*

*(3) Give her eternal rest, O Lord.  
May light unending shine on her.*

*(4) I know that my Redeemer lives;  
The last day I shall rise again.*

Text based on "Subvenite." Translation (c) 1981, Dennis C. Smolarski, S.J. All rights reserved. Used with permission. Music: "Old Hundredth" by Louis Bourgeois.

After a few final prayers, the priest or deacon then says, "Let us take our sister to her place of rest."

If the "Song of Farewell" (like the one above) is supposed to be the climax of the funeral, then I think that it is not appropriate to have another congregational hymn as the procession leaves the church. Instrumental music or music sung by the choir is more appropriate.

#### *Cremation*

Let me take a brief look at cremation. Since cremation could be a topic all by itself, I will just give a few comments. There are many different options for the timing of cremation. Though it can take place immediately after death and the cremated remains brought to the funeral rites, the ritual suggests a different approach. It states, "The Church clearly prefers and urges that the body of the deceased be present for the funeral rites since the presence of the human body better expresses the values which the Church affirms in those rites." (OCF #413)

The presence of the body most clearly brings to mind the life and death of the person. I believe there is much wisdom in having the body present as people grieve and begin to say "goodbye." As a one-year-old, I remember going to the funeral home and seeing my grandfather in his coffin. I am grateful for that memory.

So, when possible, cremation takes place after the Vigil and Funeral.

The ritual goes on to mention, "The cremated remains should be buried in a grave or entombed in a mausoleum or columbarium." (OCF #417)

One of our priests from Oklahoma told this story about his experience with a family:

"I met Charlie when a Catholic neighbor tipped me off his wife was dying at their home. I went by right away, on a Saturday night, and baptized her at the family's request. She died later that night, and every Sunday after that Charlie was at Sunday Mass dressed up in his best suit. He had come back to Church in a very intentional way, and the more I got to know him the more I liked him. By this time I had learned of his colorful background, which included stints as a bootlegger (the kids always asked why they never had any gas to sell at their little gas station), as a photographer, a barbecue stand guy during the State Fair, and as a bail bondsman.

"When Charlie died about a year later I met with the grown sons and daughters to plan the funeral. They asked if they could have cremation. I said yes, but something told me not to leave it at that, so I said, "You can have cremation. But the Church insists that the remains be buried in some public place where years from now grandchildren can visit without asking you. Not in the backyard, because you will eventually sell the house. Not loaded in shotgun shells and fired over his favorite hunting ground, but in a respectable place.

"There was silence, which told me I had hit paydirt. Finally the oldest son spoke up, 'Are you sure we can't take just some of the ashes and spread them on a craps table in Las Vegas?'

I said "no." Some months later the family reported to me that Charlie's ashes were buried in a cemetery and they felt good about it.

Recently I spoke about cremation at our monthly parish luncheon for senior citizens. I gave them a pamphlet about cremation and they asked quite a few questions.

Education is important. Perhaps some of the directors of Catholic cemeteries can offer to speak in different parishes in their diocese.

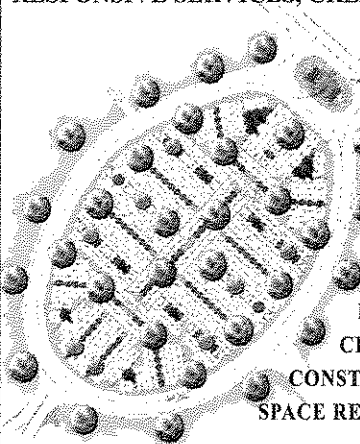
Pre-planning is also important. There are several good resources to give to families so they can select the scripture readings and make other choices prior to the time of death. Perhaps Catholic cemeteries and mortuaries can make these available to those who come to them before a death occurs.

### Rite of Committal

The final service is the "Rite of Committal." During my early years of priesthood, we often went from the funeral Mass in church to the cemetery chapel. We prayed in the chapel and then departed. After the current *Order of Christian Funerals* came out in 1989, we began to go to the actual gravesite more often. I think there is much wisdom in celebrating this final ritual where the body or the cremated remains are to be placed.

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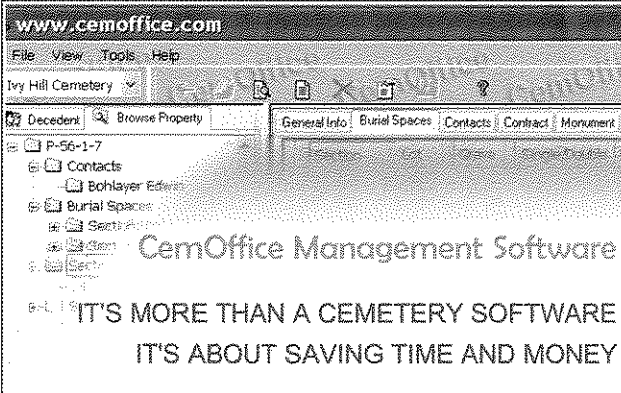
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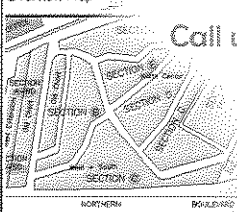
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According to the ritual, "Whenever possible, the rite of committal is to be celebrated at the site of committal, that is, beside the open grave or place of interment, rather than in a cemetery chapel." (OCF #204)

While at the grave, the ritual suggests that the body be lowered or placed in the crypt while the family is gathered in prayer. "The act of committal takes place after the words of committal or at the conclusion of the rite. Through this act the community of faith proclaims that the grave or place of interment, once a sign of futility and despair, has been transformed by means of Christ's own death and resurrection into a sign of hope and promise." (OCF #209)

Here is the beautiful prayer of committal:

*Because God has chosen to call our sister from this life to Himself, we commit her body to the earth (or its resting place), 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 sister to the Lord, that the Lord may embrace her in peace and raise up her body on the last day.*

In the case of cremation the words change a bit: "*We commit her earthly remains to their resting place.*"

During the time when the coffin is lowered into the ground, I always invite those present to sing a hymn from the worship sheet. Certain hymns are easy, such as "O God Our Help in Ages Past" or "Amazing Grace." Another appropriate hymn is "O Lord, You Died That All Might Live." It is slightly more difficult and is sung to the melody "Melita." We often use this hymn during the burial of one of our priests.

*O Lord, You Died  
That All Might Live*

*(1) O Lord, you died that all might live and rise to see the perfect day. The fullness of your mercy give to this our friend for whom we pray.*

*(Refrain)*

*O Lamb of God, Redeemer blest,  
Grant her eternal light and rest.*

*(2) Lord, bless our friend who died in you, as you have given her release. Enliven her since she was true, and give her everlasting peace.*

Text: Richard Littledale  
Tune: MELITA, John B. Dykes

After the committal, the rite concludes with several more prayers. If not done previously, one of family members may wish to say a few words. In our area, we usually invite everyone back to the parish for a meal and to visit. If there is no gathering back at the parish, people could continue to visit at the cemetery.

I now wish to go back to the question presented to me: "Are Catholic funeral rites relevant to Catholics Today?"

I believe they are very relevant. As I mentioned earlier, we have the rituals given to us by the Church and we can not change them. What we need to do is to understand the rituals, select from the many options given to us, use music wisely, and do the rituals well.

If the rituals are done well, they can continue to offer comfort and hope to our people. I conclude with the last words of the Rite of Committal:

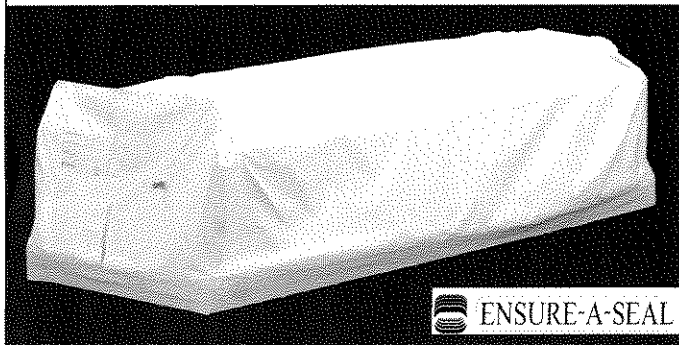
*May the peace of God, which is beyond all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in the knowledge and love of God and of His Son, our Lord Jesus Christ.*

Reverend Stephen Bird, Archdiocese of Oklahoma City, is pastor, Epiphany Parish in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma. He also serves as director of the Archdiocesan Office of Worship and Spiritual Life. Reverend Bird may be reached at 405.722.2110 or [epiphany@epiphanyoke.com](mailto:epiphany@epiphanyoke.com).

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