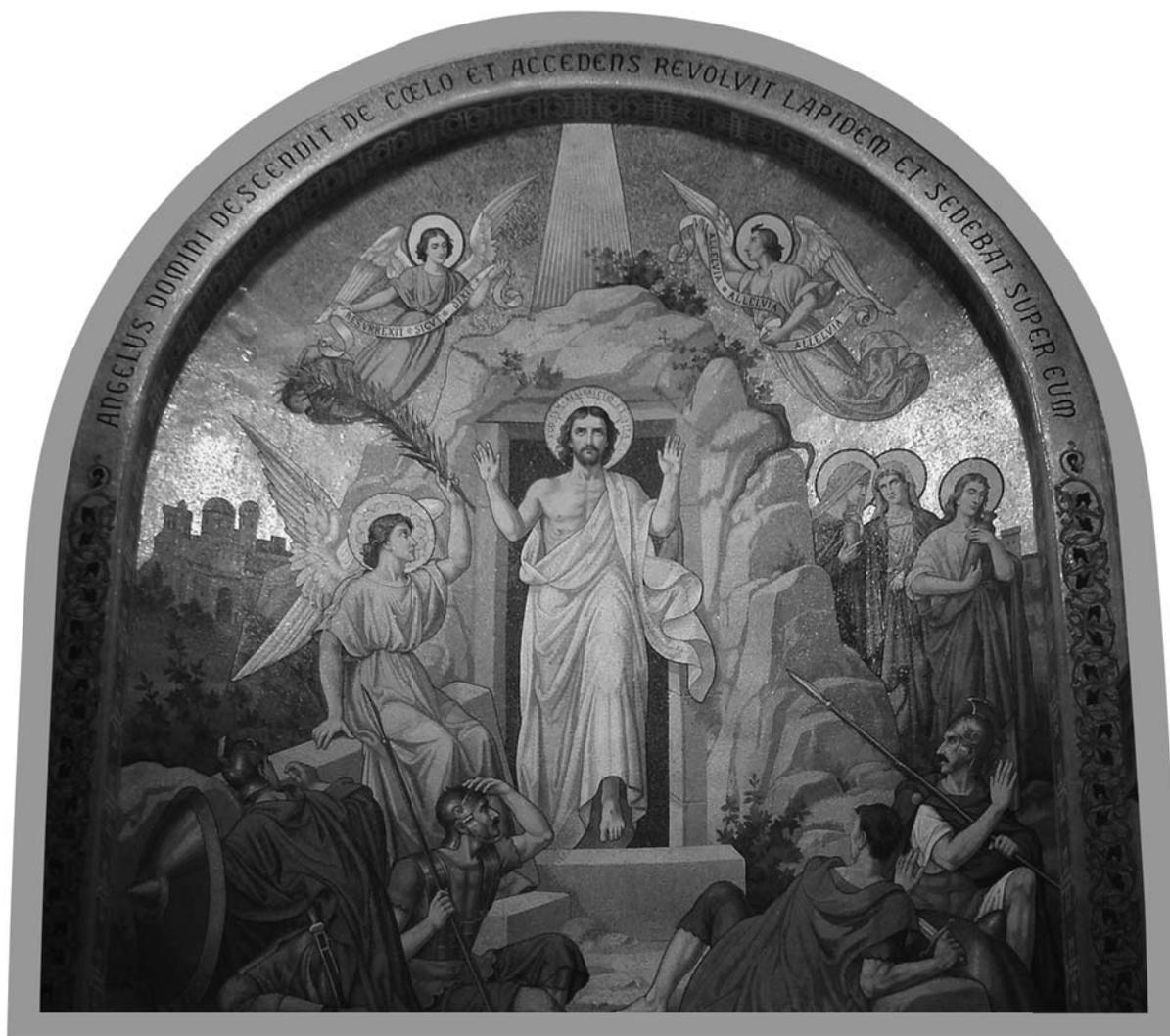


# Pastoral Letter on the Order of Christian Funerals



## *In Union with Christ's Dying and Rising*



Our Catholic funeral rites as a  
sharing in the Paschal Mystery



Archbishop Allen H. Vigneron  
Promulgated on February 2, 2013  
The Presentation of the Lord

*For if we have grown into union with him through a death  
like his, we shall also be united with him in the resurrection.*  
—Romans 6:5





Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

The mystery of death has troubled and fascinated humanity since the fall of our first parents, Adam and Eve. Death comes to us as an inheritance from the Original Sin, and by our own personal sins we have signed-on to this tragic legacy. *All have sinned and are deprived of the glory of God*, St. Paul teaches.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, many people view death as an unremittingly frightening prospect, one from which they spend their lives trying to distract themselves, because they feel overwhelmed by their sins or because they lack faith in God.

Our own experiences of mourning deceased family members and friends teach us the deep longing of the human heart for hope in the face of death. But we also know, in our own lives or through others, the temptation to avoid thoughts of death, as well as the temptation either to move too quickly through our mourning or to dwell on our sadness with too little hope. Many people are tempted to engage in the process of mourning as an intense, but merely human, drama. And we know that there are many who, out of a different kind of concern, wish to avoid “making a fuss” in favor of extremely simplified acts of “saying goodbye” to their deceased loved ones.

Today, these temptations and others are deeply influencing the approach to death and burial taken even by those of the household of faith, the Church. Many Catholics have lost a clear sense about how to face death with faith and hope, about the importance of exercising Christian charity by praying for our beloved dead, and about what it truly means to experience the consolation that only our communion with Jesus Christ can offer.

## CHRIST'S VICTORY, OUR SALVATION

*We do not want you to be unaware, brothers [and sisters], about those who have fallen asleep, so that you may not grieve like the rest, who have no hope.*

—I Thessalonians 4:13

For it is in Jesus that we find the definitive answer to sin and death. We know, following upon the words of St. Paul above, that by God we are *justified freely by his grace through the redemption in Christ Jesus*.<sup>2</sup> At Holy Mass, when the priest offers Eucharistic Prayer IV, he addresses the Father in these words: *And you so loved the world, Father most holy, that in the fullness of time you sent your Only Begotten Son to be our Savior... To accomplish your plan, he gave himself up to death, and, rising from the dead, he destroyed death and restored life*. We hear proclaimed in this prayer, and throughout Sacred Scripture and the Church's Tradition, this foundational truth: the Passover of Jesus Christ through death to risen life is our Passover as well.

Christ is risen! And he invites us to share in his victory. The salvation won by Christ for all of us becomes a gift for each of us by virtue of our Baptism:

*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.*<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Romans 3:23.

<sup>2</sup>Romans 3:24.

<sup>3</sup>Romans 6:3-4.





We know that our union with the crucified and risen Lord Jesus, established in Baptism, is perfected in the Eucharistic sacrifice, as we eat *the holy Bread of eternal life* and drink from *the Chalice of everlasting salvation*.<sup>4</sup> The Banquet of Christ's Body and Blood is our Passover meal, renewing and amplifying the graces of our Baptism, and causing us to share to the fullest degree possible in the dying and rising of Jesus, who is *the Bread of Life*<sup>5</sup>, *the resurrection and the life*<sup>6</sup>, and *the way, the truth, and the life*.<sup>7</sup>

These points concerning Original Sin, salvation in Jesus Christ, Baptism, and the Holy Eucharist are essential in helping us understand more deeply our Catholic funeral rites. For in the funeral liturgy all of these essential elements of our faith come together with great poignancy, and we express in a most powerful way our hope in Christ's resurrection.

In other words, the Church's funeral rites are about salvation. The Fathers of the Second Vatican Council sought to make this clearer even in the composition and structure of the rites, as they determined that, *The rite for the burial of the dead should express more clearly the paschal character of Christian death*.<sup>8</sup> **Therefore, the first purpose of this pastoral message is to help all of us understand more deeply the truth that the funeral liturgy renews and strengthens our communion with Jesus in his dying and rising.**

**The second purpose of this message is to introduce some practical steps by which we can more perfectly express our faith through the funeral rites of the Church.** These practical steps are presented in the accompanying document *Directives for Catholic Funerals: Questions and Answers* and its appendix, and are to guide the work of all throughout the Archdiocese of Detroit who are engaged in the planning or celebration of these sacred rites.

## PASSING OVER WITH JESUS: THE CHURCH'S FUNERAL RITES

*Now there was a virtuous and righteous man named Joseph who, though he was a member of the council, had not consented to their plan of action. He came from the Jewish town of Arimathea and was awaiting the kingdom of God. He went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus. After he had taken the body down, he wrapped it in a linen cloth and laid him in a rock-hewn tomb in which no one had yet been buried. It was the day of preparation, and the Sabbath was about to begin. The women who had come from Galilee with him followed behind, and when they had seen the tomb and the way in which his body was laid in it, they returned and prepared spices and perfumed oils.*

—Luke 23:50-56

Our tradition of burial and praying for the dead is rooted in customs we have inherited from the Old Covenant. We read in the Second Book of Maccabees, for example, that prayers and sacrifices for the dead are "holy and pious" and can have the power of freeing the dead from their sins.<sup>9</sup> There are also numerous examples of burial in the Old Testament, and the account of Our Lord's burial on Good Friday testifies to the care and reverence with which the bodies of the dead were treated by the Jewish people.

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<sup>4</sup>Roman Canon.

<sup>7</sup>John 14:6.

<sup>5</sup>John 6:35.

<sup>8</sup>Sacrosanctum Concilium, 81. <sup>9</sup>2 Maccabees 12:43-46.

<sup>6</sup>John 11:25.





The burial of Jesus also serves as a model because, for those who are baptized into Christ, the body becomes holy, the temple of the Holy Spirit, and deserving of special reverence. We express this reverence through our funeral rites in several ways: the use of dignified coffins, clothing the coffin with the white pall, which serves as a reminder of the baptismal garment, the sprinkling of the body with holy water and the incensation at the end of the Funeral Mass, which symbolizes both reverence for the body and the rising of our prayers before the throne of God's mercy.<sup>10</sup>

To some degree, we could say that the three-part celebration of the Order of Christian Funerals has to do with three ways of showing this reverence to the body of the deceased, even as we pray for the repose of his or her soul:

- Vigil for the Deceased: Our first ritual encounter with the mystery of a person's death, when prayers, memories, and emotions flood our hearts and find expression in the simple yet beautiful rite of keeping vigil near the body of the recently deceased.
- Funeral Liturgy: The central act of worship we offer for the dead, this liturgy is ordinarily celebrated in form of the Funeral Mass. In the offering of the Holy Eucharist, we place the body of the deceased before the Lord's altar, interceding for the one who has died and offering his or her life along with the Body and Blood of Jesus. This "Prayer after Communion" from the Funeral Liturgy summarizes what we ask God to give to the relative or friend we are burying: *Grant, we pray, almighty God, that your servant, who has journeyed from this world, may by this sacrifice be cleansed and freed from sin and so receive the everlasting joys of the resurrection.* Our own faith in the Paschal Mystery is also strengthened in celebrating the Funeral Mass: *In the eucharistic sacrifice, the Church's celebration of Christ's Passover from death to life, the faith of the baptized in the paschal mystery is renewed and nourished.*<sup>11</sup> These graces are renewed in the celebration of "month's mind" and anniversary Masses for the dead.
- Committal: In this final act of the funeral rites, we perform in a most proximate way the corporal work of mercy, burying the dead. In the Rite of Committal, we commit the body of the deceased to its final resting place, confident that *the Lord Jesus Christ will change our mortal bodies to be like his in glory.*<sup>12</sup>

Here it is appropriate for me to underscore that the Church's clear preference is for burial of the bodies of her daughters and sons rather than their cremation. In this we are witnessing to our belief that our bodies are made holy from the moment of Baptism and are destined to rise on the Last Day. While the Church permits cremation when circumstances justify it, the choice of cremation must never express a denial of Church teaching. Further, cremated remains must always be treated with the same respect the Church accords to the bodies of the deceased, and this includes their reverent disposition in a cemetery. If the body of a Catholic is to be cremated, the Church clearly prefers, indeed urges us, that it be present for the funeral rites.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Cf. Revelation 8:4, "The smoke of the incense along with the prayers of the holy ones went up before God from the hand of the angel."

<sup>11</sup> General Introduction to the Order of Christian Funerals, 3.

<sup>12</sup> Order of Christian Funerals, 219.

<sup>13</sup> Order of Christian Funerals, 413-414, 417, 426 (cf. CIC 1176§3).





Of course, the Church's funeral rites are not only about showing reverence for the body of the deceased. There are also many other ways each of these three parts of the funeral liturgy plays an important role in assisting both the dead and the living. We have seen the great efficacy of the funeral rites in joining our beloved dead to the Passover of Jesus. Our belief in the communion of saints also gives us the consolation of knowing our prayers are of great benefit to those who have died in Christ and are now undergoing purification in Purgatory, in preparation for the glory of heaven.

And these rituals are also of great benefit to the mourners themselves. First, all of the Church's liturgical worship is *redemptive*, meaning it accomplishes the saving work of Jesus Christ in our lives. This is the most important good fruit that comes to the living through their participation in the rites of Christian burial. Second, the Church, like a good mother, consoles her children at their time of loss and grief:

*The celebration of the Christian funeral brings hope and consolation to the living. While proclaiming the Gospel of Jesus Christ and witnessing to Christian hope in the resurrection, the funeral rites also recall to all who take part in them God's mercy and judgment and meet the human need to turn always to God in times of crisis.*

Indeed, the faithful celebration of the Church's funeral rites greatly benefits us spiritually and consoles us in our sorrow.

These rites also aid us in our relationships with God and with the whole community of faith. Our coming together physically is a sign of the strengthening of our spiritual bonds, as we worship together and console one another with the faith and hope we have in Christ Jesus:

*The Church through its funeral rites commends the dead to God's merciful love and pleads for the forgiveness of their sins. At the funeral rites, especially at the celebration of the eucharistic sacrifice, the Christian community affirms and expresses the union of the Church on earth with the Church in heaven in one great communion of saints.<sup>14</sup>*

Unfortunately, many people today have come to see the Church's funeral rites as overelaborate and unnecessary. They will sometimes refer to the traditional funeral as "making a fuss" or "making a big deal" out of death and mourning. As the principal pastor of the faithful here in the Archdiocese of Detroit, I certainly need to acknowledge the often legitimate motivations that prompt concern about matters such as the cost of funerals, but I also need to offer the truth that the funeral rites themselves are essential to the life of the Church, and that these rites ought to be celebrated at the death of every Christian. No Catholic should pass over to the Father without being accompanied by the prayers of the Church.

Whenever one of the faithful dies, we have a duty to celebrate these rites with reverence, awe, and great faith and hope. While there are often genuine human or economic concerns motivating those who wish to set aside our funeral rites, even these legitimate concerns should only modify, and not change in any essential way, the form of Christian burial given to us by Christ through his Church.

The funeral rites of the Church are some of the most beautiful, evocative, and powerful expressions of our Catholic faith. They are gifts given to us by God our Father.

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<sup>14</sup>*General Introduction to the Order of Christian Funerals, 6.*





Christian burial is also an act of charity we offer for one another. Whenever financial or logistical concerns burden a grieving family, pastors and their co-workers should do all they can to accommodate the legitimate requests of the faithful. The faithful, in turn, are called to honor the leadership given by their pastors, and to recognize that there can be many reasons—of a spiritual or practical nature—why certain accommodations may be impossible. The whole journey of the Christian funeral is a sacred time, when the Church's ministers and those who mourn are called to cooperate in charity as they plan and celebrate these sacred rites.

## WITNESSES TO THE RESURRECTION

*I am the resurrection and the life; whoever believes in me, even if he dies, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die.*

—John 11:25-26

I want to conclude this pastoral message by asking you to recognize in the journey of the Christian funeral a privileged opportunity for evangelization and for being evangelized. The testimony of many of our own pastors here in the Archdiocese of Detroit confirms the wisdom of the Church, that the events of death and Christian burial are opportune occasions for sharing the Good News of our salvation. For those who believe in Jesus Christ, death and burial are sacred events, in which God draws very near to us and invites us to draw near to him.

Every aspect of preparing and celebrating the rites of Christian burial, from the offering of condolences and prayers, to the planning of readings and music, to the celebration of the Vigil for the Deceased, Funeral Mass, and Rite of Committal, all provide opportunities to share Christ with one another.

We must help each other to recognize God's presence in each of these moments, and to entrust ourselves and our beloved dead to his unfathomable love and mercy. We should help especially those who either are not Catholic or who do not practice their faith, that they might come to recognize the occasion of a Christian funeral as a profoundly grace-filled moment. We have a sacred responsibility to do all we can to help others to know the faith and hope that are our great consolation in the face of death—faith and hope in the power of Christ's resurrection—and to see that the graces they experience during a funeral are meant to help them embrace the fullness of life in Jesus Christ and his Church.

For all Christians, the Church's funeral rites are essential to the life of faith, hope, and charity to which God our Father calls us. In these rites, our heavenly Father joins us by the power of his Holy Spirit to the mystery of Christ's death and resurrection, binding us more closely to Christ and to each other in the Communion of Saints.

Through the intercession of the Blessed Virgin Mary, the Mother of Sorrows, and St. Joseph, the Patron of a Happy Death, may we always be grateful for these precious gifts of salvation, and be led without stumbling through the darkness of death to the dawn of everlasting life.

With prayers for you and joining you in prayer for all the faithful departed of the Archdiocese of Detroit, I remain

Sincerely yours in Christ,

The Most Reverend Allen H. Vigneron  
Archbishop of Detroit



*For this is the will of my  
Father, that everyone who sees  
the Son and believes in him  
may have eternal life, and I  
shall raise him on the last day.*  
—John 6:40



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