

The Year of Faith

Diocese of Davenport

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[THE SACRAMENTS AND SACRAMENTALS OF HEALING]

A review of the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation, Indulgences, the Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick, Viaticum, and the Order of Christian Funerals.

Introduction

As part of our observation of the Year of Faith, the U.S. Bishops are encouraging Catholics to return to the Sacrament of Reconciliation.

Jesus' mission was to proclaim and, through his paschal mystery, bring about our reconciliation with the Father. After the Resurrection, Jesus charged the Apostles to do likewise. Indeed, this is the mission of the whole Church: to proclaim and help bring about, through preaching and teaching, through our pastoral care and concern, and through prayer and the sacraments, this very reconciliation.

Over the centuries, and from place to place, the ways that we have celebrated this reconciliation, this healing, through the sacraments and other rites has varied considerably. But what underlies them has not: we sin, and are in need of forgiveness; we are broken, and in need of being made whole; we are ill—spiritually, mentally, physically—and in need of healing. And the Church, in fidelity to the call and example of Christ, has sought to respond to those needs.

The U.S. Bishops remind us that. “[i]n the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation, also called confession, we meet the Lord, who wants to grant forgiveness and the grace to live a renewed life in him.” So this series will begin with an exploration of that Sacrament.

In the process, we will need to talk about what the Church teaches about sin and its consequences.

We will review how this Sacrament developed over the ages, and explore what the Church currently teaches about its celebration today. We will also bring up and explore a largely misunderstood and almost forgotten Catholic practice: Indulgences. We will then turn our attention to our sacramental ministry to the sick and the dying. As with Reconciliation, we will review our history as well as our current practices. Finally, we will talk about how we pray for and take leave of our beloved dead through The Order of Christian Funerals.

If we are going to talk about death, then we will also need to talk about heaven, hell, and purgatory, about “eschatology.”

In other words, in this series we will walk a journey together. How is it that the Church ministers to us in our times of brokenness and in our need for healing, physically as well as spiritually? How does the Church minister when physical healing is no longer possible, and the time of dying has begun? And how does the Church minister to her children once they are dead, and to those who mourn them?

Of course, we will not be able to cover every detail of this amazing history, and of the theology of these sacraments, in the space and time we have here. Those who want to do further reading this Lent may want to look at *The United States Catholic Catechism for Adults* or at Fr. Lawrence Mick's *Understanding the Sacraments Today* (Liturgical Press, 2006). Both are very readable.

What is Sin?

Based on the work of St. Augustine, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* defines sin as “an offense against reason, truth, and right conscience; it is failure in genuine love for God and neighbor caused by a perverse attachment to certain goods. It wounds the nature of man and injures human solidarity. It has been defined as ‘an utterance, a deed, or a desire contrary to the eternal law’” (#1849).

The language of “love” is important here. All sin eventually comes down to a failure to love – to put God and others first! It’s important to remember that, as human persons, we are made for God, for relationship. Addressing God, St. Augustine put it this way in his *Confessions*: “Our hearts are restless, until they rest in You!” Restless hearts; that sure describes us!

Because God gave us the gift of freedom, we can choose: do we find our ultimate rest in God, or do we go looking elsewhere? Because that gift has been damaged by Original Sin, we don’t always choose wisely or well. Our restlessness takes us away from God instead. That’s why the Church has a body of moral teachings: to help us learn, realize, discern what are the most loving actions we can take.

As the Second Vatican Council reminded us, we are all called to respond to God’s invitation and pursue a relationship with God; we are all called to holiness. Turning away from God and getting “attached” to other things instead (as the definition above says); that’s called sin.

That’s one of the great insights of the Christian tradition. Made in the image of the God who is Relationship (Trinity), we are made to be relational beings. We cannot exist without God; we cannot exist without each other. Sin damages, and even ruptures, those relationships.

Think about our human friendships. There are things that we can say and do to deepen those friendships, and things that we can say and do (or *fail* to say and do) that strain or even completely break a friendship. The same is true (from our end) with God. While God’s love for us can never be lost, we can strain or even break *our* friendship with God.

Q: What is needed for a sin to be “mortal”?

A: According to the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (CCC 1857), for a sin to be considered “mortal” all three of the following conditions must be met: it must involve [1] something grave (serious), and it must be done with “[2] full knowledge and [3] deliberate consent” (freedom).

As the *US Catholic Catechism for Adults* puts it: “We commit mortal sin when we consciously and freely choose to do something grave against the divine law and contrary to our final destiny” – which is to be in complete union with God for ever.

What is considered “grave” is laid out in the 10 Commandments (CCC 1858).

Q: Does that mean that “venial” sins are no big deal?

A: Not at all. As we will cover next week, we are creatures of habit. The more we act in a certain way, the more likely it is that we will act that way in the future. So, the more we sin—even those seemingly minor sins—the more likely it is that we will fall into sin, even serious sin, more easily (CCC 1863).

The traditional language that we've used for sins that strain our relationship with God is "venial" sins; we call those sins "mortal" that sever the relationship.

Maybe this image, or analogy, might help. Imagine standing in front of someone, face-to-face. When we have not sinned we stand before God face-to-face, as it were. Our relationship is whole. When we sin (venially), we begin to turn away from God. Now, instead of "seeing" God fully, we only see God out of the corner of our eye. We have to strain to catch a glimpse, to relate. To sin "mortally" means to turn completely away from God, to have our back to him, to no longer be in what we have traditionally called "a state of grace." God is still facing (loving) us; we are the ones who have turned away.

What effects does this "turning away" have; and—with the help of God's grace—how can we turn back?

Effects of Sin

What are the effects, or consequences, of sin—what is it that sin *does* to us (and those around us)? To begin with, as mentioned above, sin injures (and, if mortal, ruptures) our relationship with God, as well as with the people we've hurt by our actions or omissions. But, sin goes deeper than that.

As human beings, we are connected to one another. When we talk about being part of the human family, or part of the Body of Christ, these are not just empty words. We are bound to, in solidarity with, one another. Therefore, in some way my sin affects you—and all of humanity. Even my most private sins have a ripple effect; like a pebble thrown into a pond, it spreads out and affects the whole pond and everything in it in some way.

So, in the first place, we incur what we have traditionally called "guilt" by sinning. The remedy for this guilt is repentance, and the seeking of forgiveness. But that's not all. Sin has even more profound and long-lasting consequences.

It has been said that we become who we are by what we do. In other words, for good or ill, we are creatures of habit. If we do good, it becomes easier to do good. It becomes a habit; we come to be seen as a good person. The same is true with sin. In addition to hurting others and disrupting the communion that we share, we know that if we do evil, it becomes easier to do evil.

So, even after the sin itself is forgiven, it will have lasting effects. Traditionally, this has been thought of as the restitution that is owed in justice to God, and for that reason it has been called the "temporal punishment" due to sin.

However, we need to be careful here, and not take the language too literally, that "punishment" here is referring to a "kind of vengeance inflicted by God" (CCC 1472). Rather, what we are talking about here are the natural consequences of sin: a deepening attachment to what is wrong, a turning away from

God. Just as the sin itself, the guilt, needs to be healed by forgiveness, so, too, does this effect. That's what ongoing conversion—turning back to God—is all about.

Let's look at a simple example. Say that I borrow your car and, due to my negligence, wreck it. Even if I apologize, and you forgive me, there are still consequences to my actions. I need to replace your car. My insurance rates go up. You (and others) will be less likely to lend me a car again. It will take time and effort to regain your full trust, for my insurance company to bring my rates back down, for me to pay off the car I have to replace.

Both the immediate (relational) and long-term effects of sin need healing. So when the Church follows Christ's example in ministering to sinners, she addresses both sides of the coin: forgiveness of sins as well as the healing of their long-term consequences (conversion).

History of Penance and Reconciliation

In this section, we will briefly—and in quite a simplified way—go over how our modern-day Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation developed. Basically, the Church's ministry of reconciliation is rooted in the ministry of Jesus. Though the form this reconciliation, especially sacramental reconciliation, takes has changed over time, at its core it is in continuity with what Jesus did and called the Church to do in his name (see CCC 1447-48).

In Baptism, we are born again, we become a new creation. Yet, we still sin. The reality of post-baptismal sin was a problem that the very early Church had to address (see, for example, Romans 6:2-11). James encourages the confession of sins (Js 5:16). John makes mention of the Risen Christ giving the power to forgive sins to the disciples (Jn 20:19-23), and while the passage may have originally referred to baptism, it was quickly applied to post-baptismal sin as well.

While some argued that the Church could not forgive serious post-baptismal sin—that such a person was lost—others were less strict, emphasizing God's mercy. We shouldn't be surprised that, over time, the Church began to address this need for *re*-conversion in a way similar to the way it addressed the needs of those initially converting to the faith: by developing a process similar to the catechumenate.

This "second baptism" – a once-in-a-lifetime possibility reserved for the most serious sins (such as murder, apostasy, adultery; lesser sins were, like today, forgiven through personal acts of prayer and penitence as well as by the Eucharist) – involved being set aside from the rest of the community and spending a prolonged period of time in prayer, fasting, and other acts of penance. And, just as the Order of Catechumens was welcomed into the Church at the Triduum, so, too, was this Order of Penitents welcomed back (reconciled) and declared forgiven. However, there were long-term consequences for those who had gone through such Penance; they were never quite full members of the community again. For example, they were forbidden from engaging in business, taking a case to court, holding public office, being ordained, marrying, or, if married, had to be celibate.

However, a problem soon arose. Because this “second baptism” could be celebrated only once, and because the consequences were so difficult to bear, people began to put off their *first* baptism as long as possible. By the sixth century, it was clear that this system wasn’t working any more.

So what did the Church do? It adapted. In Irish monasteries, the practice had developed of monks bringing their sins to the abbot for spiritual advice on how to help overcome them. Soon, those living around these monasteries were doing the same, and—as Irish missionaries sailed to mainland Europe—this practice came with them. The penitent confessed their sins and were given instructions on how to make recompense, with each sin assigned a given penance (found in books called Penitentials). They then returned to be declared forgiven.

Over time, even this approach became unwieldy. First, it was not always possible to return for the declaration of forgiveness (absolution), so the practice developed of granting the absolution before dismissing the penitent to do his or her penance later—the pattern we see today. Second, many of the assigned penances were difficult to perform, and if added together could become overly-burdensome, and even be greater than what one could accomplish during their lifetime!

So the practice developed of allowing for substitutions of assigned penances, whether with a set of prayers or even with almsgiving. Others could even do part of the penance for you. We see here the roots of indulgences as they later developed (and as we will be discussed below).

At the Council of Trent (1545-1563), the Sacrament of Penance was listed among the Seven Sacraments, and said to consist of what we do with the help of the Holy Spirit (contrition, confession, and satisfaction) and what God does through the Church’s ministry (absolution). It is here that we have the form of the Sacrament that forms the basis for the Rite of Penance today, as we will present next.

Healing from Sin

Sin’s “double consequence” (CCC 1472) – the damage to our communion with God and others as well as the other long-term consequences of sin; what have traditionally been called “guilt” and “temporal punishment,” respectively – was mentioned above. So, how are these effects healed? To begin with, moved by the Holy Spirit, we have to be sorry for our sins. And we need to admit that we are powerless to heal sin’s effects on our own. It is only by the gift of God’s grace that we can be healed, and we encounter that healing grace in a particular way in the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation. There we encounter Christ, who—through the ministry of the Church—addresses and heals both consequences of our sin.

At Vatican II, the communal and healing aspects of the sacrament were brought back to the forefront. The revised Rite of Penance lists three ways that the Sacrament is celebrated today. The private celebration of the Sacrament with priest and penitent, called Form 1, is the normative form of the Sacrament. Penance services (Form 2) are often celebrated during Advent and Lent and consist of a communal celebration of the Word and prayers with time for private confession (Form 1). General

absolution (Form 3) is reserved for grave emergencies, and even those who receive the sacrament in this manner must subsequently go to a priest for private confession of serious sins as soon as possible, and at least within one year.

The Sacrament—as mentioned above—consists of four elements: sorrow for our sins (contrition), confession, penance (“satisfaction”), and absolution (“reconciliation”). Each of these elements is part of the process of conversion. Since private confession lies at the heart of the Sacrament, we will describe that form (1) here.

The Liturgy of Penance begins with a greeting and blessing from the priest, followed by a reading from Scripture. Having heard God’s call to conversion, and recalling God’s mercy, we are now able to acknowledge the reality of our sins. There can be no healing if we don’t recognize that we are sick. So confession is about honestly naming what ails us. Why does the Church ask that we make this confession to a priest, who both acts in the person of Christ and represents the Christian community? First, we are a sacramental church: our encounter with God is mediated through the material, including through each other. So, in the person of the priest, we put a human face on our reconciliation with both God and the Church. In addition, left to our own devices, we can rationalize and deceive ourselves. The confessor is there to help us make a truly honest appraisal of ourselves and assist us in the journey of conversion. This is why even if we receive general absolution we must return to make a private confession: the point is our ongoing conversion and healing. After we have confessed our sins, the priest then assigns a penance, or “satisfaction,” and we express our sorrow and repentance through an act of contrition. Finally, God’s forgiveness is expressed in the words of absolution. That is, we are reconciled with God—and the Church—through Christ acting through the ministry of the priest. After a proclamation of God’s praise, we are dismissed. So, four key elements: contrition, confession, satisfaction, and absolution.

For more information on this Sacrament and celebrating it well, please see the USCCB website: <http://www.usccb.org/prayer-and-worship/sacraments/penance/sacrament-of-penance-resources-for-individuals.cfm>.

In absolution, the first effect of sin—guilt—is healed. In the penance, or satisfaction, we begin to address and heal the second effect, the “temporal punishment” due to sin. We need to be very clear here: performing the penance does not earn us God’s forgiveness. It is Christ who has made this forgiveness possible by his paschal mystery. If our sin is “mortal”—if we have turned completely away from God—then the only way to be healed or reconciled is through the grace of this Sacrament. Lesser sins—or partial turning away from God—can be healed not only by this sacrament but also through prayer, fasting, other penitential acts, and especially the Eucharist. All these are avenues of God’s healing grace and forgiveness. These penitential practices, as well as the penances assigned by the priest in confession, are not punishments for our sins. Rather, it is more helpful to think of penance as medicine, or even surgery: what is prescribed to help us deal with what lies at the root of our sins. This is what Pope John Paul II had to say about this part of this sacrament:

Order of the Rite of Penance

Reception of the Penitent

The priest welcomes the penitent, they make the Sign of the Cross, and the priest invites the penitent to have trust in God's mercy. The penitent responds, "Amen."

Reading of the Word of God

Although optional, beginning with a reading from the Scriptures—besides being in keeping with the Council's call that the celebration of all the Sacraments should be accompanied by the proclamation of the word of God—makes it clear that it is our merciful God who calls us to conversion; we are here in response to God's invitation.

Confession of Sins

With the help of the priest, the penitent makes an "integral" confession of his or her sins. Integral means that the penitent needs to tell both the kind and number of all serious sins committed since their last confession. The questions asked by a priest should be more like those of a doctor trying to make a diagnosis than a prosecutor trying to convict a criminal. The priest cannot put a limit on the number of sins a person can confess (for example, saying that one can only mention their 'top three' sins).

Acceptance of Satisfaction

Like a doctor prescribes the right medicine or procedure to help a patient heal, the priest assigns an appropriate penance that will help this particular penitent heal from the wounds of sin and continue to grow in conversion of life. A priest, therefore, cannot just assign a generic penance for everyone say, for example, at a communal penance service.

Prayer of the Penitent

The penitent then expresses sorrow for his or her sins, using his or her own words or a familiar prayer. For example, a version of the Act of Contrition may be used, such as:

My God, I am sorry for my sins with all my heart. In choosing to do wrong and in failing to do good, I have sinned against you whom I should love above all things. I firmly intend, with your help. To do penance, to sin no more, and to avoid whatever leads me to sin, Our Savior Jesus Christ suffered and died for us. In his name, my God, have mercy.

Absolution

The priest then says the prayer of absolution, to which the penitent answers, "Amen."

Proclamation of Praise of God

The priest says, "Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good," to which the penitent replies, "His mercy endures forever."

Dismissal

The priest then dismisses the penitent who has been reconciled.

Acts of satisfaction—which, while remaining simple and humble, should be made to express more clearly all that they signify—mean a number of valuable things: They are the sign of the personal commitment that the Christian has made to God in the sacrament to begin a new life (and therefore they should not be reduced to mere formulas to be recited, but should consist of acts of worship, charity, mercy or reparation). They include the idea that the pardoned sinner is able to join his own physical and spiritual mortification—which has been sought after or at least accepted—to the passion of Jesus, who has obtained the forgiveness for him. They remind us that even after absolution there remains in the Christian a dark area due to the wound of sin, to the imperfection of love in repentance, to the weakening of the spiritual faculties. It is an area in which there still operates an infectious source of sin which must always be fought with mortification and penance. This is the meaning of the humble but sincere act of satisfaction. (R&P, 189)

More than simply reciting a few prayers, penance (or satisfaction) is about joining ourselves to Christ on the Cross and thereby becoming more like him (see CCC 1459-1460), while seeking to repair the harm we have done, to make amends. That’s why the priest is told that the assigned penance should be a specific help to our ongoing conversion, based on what we have confessed (Rite of Penance #18).

Remember that “temporal punishment” includes the disordered attachment that we have to sin, which keeps us from full communion with God. We need help turning back fully to God: that’s the purpose of the penance or satisfaction, of the acts of love and mercy, of prayer and penance, that we undertake here and now—and of Purgatory after we die (more on that later). In other words, this healing is not a one-time event, but a process that lasts a life-time—and even beyond, which brings us to Indulgences.

The Seal of the Confessional

Q: Can a priest ever talk about what he hears in confession, or use that information in any way?

A: No. Here is what the *US Catholic Catechism for Adults* has to say:

“The Church declares that every priest who hears confessions is bound under very severe penalties to keep absolute secrecy regarding the sins that his penitents gave confessed to him. He can make no use of knowledge that confession gives him about penitents’ lives. This secret, which admits of no exceptions, is called the “sacramental seal,” because what the penitent has made known to the priest remains “sealed” by the sacrament. (CCC #1467)”

Why? The confessional is sacred space. Confession is a most intimate encounter between God and the penitent that should not be impeded in any way. In order for penitents to be completely free to confess their sins, they need to know that their secrets are completely safe. Otherwise, there would be the temptation to be less than completely honest.

Indulgences

If a friend asked you about Indulgences, what would you say? Would you look away sheepishly, and mutter something about “we don’t do that anymore”? Do you see Indulgences as a sort of “magic eraser” for the soul, a way to earn forgiveness of sins, or an ecclesial “Get-out-of-jail-free” card worth so many days off of Purgatory? It is clear that Indulgences are not well understood and, as a result, we tend to stay away from these helps on our journey of conversion.

Definition of an Indulgence

From the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (#1471)

“An indulgence is a remission before God of the temporal punishment due to sins whose guilt has already been forgiven, which the faithful Christian who is duly disposed gains under certain prescribed conditions through the action of the Church which, as the minister of redemption, dispenses and applies with authority the treasury of the satisfactions of Christ and the saints.”

From the *US Catholic Catechism for Adults* (p. 244)

“Every sin has consequences. It disrupts our communion with God and the Church, wakens our ability to resist temptation, and hurts others. The necessity of healing these consequences, once the sin itself has been forgiven, is called temporal punishment. Prayer, fasting, almsgiving, and other works of charity can take away entirely or diminish this temporal punishment. Because of the fullness of redemption obtained for us by Christ, the Church attaches to certain prayers and actions an *indulgence* or pardon, that is, the full or partial remission of temporal punishment due to sin. Christ, acting through the Church, brings about the healing of the consequences of sin when an individual uses such a prayer or engages in such an action.”

The official definition of an Indulgence is found in the box to the left. It is a pretty dense definition that we need to take apart. Let’s begin with the word itself: indulgence. At its root, it means to show kindness or tenderness, leniency or mercy. Indulgences are about grace, God’s gift to us—not something we “earn.”

Next: remission. To “remit” is to lessen or reduce. What is remitted? The “temporal punishment” due to sins that have *already been forgiven*. Indulgences do *not* forgive sins (address the “guilt” due to sins) but are about healing the consequences or effects of that sin. Some Indulgences remit *all* of the effect (a “plenary” indulgence) and some remit only part (a “partial” indulgence).

Some may remember Indulgences referred to in terms of “days.” Unfortunately, such a way of talking about Indulgences resulted in significant misunderstandings, as if

the numbers referred to “time off of Purgatory.” That was never the case. Recall the section on the history of the Sacrament of Reconciliation, and the practice of commuting penances. The “days” referred to in older texts are a measure of the equivalent days of penance. That kind of moral mathematics has no role in Indulgences today.

In reforming the practice of Indulgences in the wake of Vatican II, Pope Paul VI wanted to make clear that the ultimate purpose of Indulgences is conversion, about helping us to become more Christ-like by freeing us from the effects of sin (especially our attachment to it). Paragraph 4 of the Introduction to the *Manual of Indulgences* states: “The Apostolic Penitentiary [the Vatican office that oversees Indulgences] therefore, rather than stress the repetition of formulas and acts, has been concerned to put greater emphasis on the Christian way of life and to focus attention on cultivating a spirit of prayer and penance and on the exercise of the theological virtues [faith, hope, love].”

Who may be helped by an Indulgence? As the definition states, only a baptized Christian who is properly disposed (not excommunicated, in a state of grace) may gain an Indulgence. The benefits of the Indulgence may be applied to the person him or herself, or to the dead.

From where do Indulgences come? How do they “work”? While ministered by the Church, the efficacy of Indulgences is based solely in what Christ has done—directly or in the lives of the saints. Traditionally, we have referred to the “treasury” of “merits” (“satisfactions”) of Christ and the saints that the Church dispenses. If we take this metaphor too literally, we end up thinking of some kind of divine bank account that Christ and the saints put deposits into and then the Church makes withdrawals on our behalf. On the one hand, this way of talking about indulgences reminds us that we do not earn anything; this is a gift in which we cooperate. On the other, we need to be careful not to turn the journey of conversion into a financial deal, and grace into a “thing.”

Perhaps another way to think about it is this: First, we must always keep in mind that Christ is the ultimate agent of reconciliation; what the Church does is carry on Christ’s ministry of reconciliation. Second, in the case of Indulgences, what the Church does is intercede for the penitent, in a sense asking that conversion (the fruit of penance) would come more easily and quickly. Third, Indulgences are efficacious (they “work”) only because Christ has promised to answer such a prayer. Fourth, the answer comes in the form of grace, help in the journey of conversion. The effects of such grace are conditioned by the openness/contrition of the penitent (conditions of the indulgence). Finally, because of our communion in Christ, the prayers of the saints also aid us in our journey of conversion.

Of what do Indulgences consist? The “prescribed conditions” for the different types of Indulgences vary. As mentioned above, there are two kinds of indulgences: partial and plenary. The Church’s rules concerning indulgences are spelled out in the *Manual of Indulgences* (4th edition, 1999; English edition, 2006). The citations below (“Norms”) refer to this document. What we will do here is go over some of the basics, but you should see that document for important details. The conditions for obtaining each type of indulgence are listed in the box below.

In order to gain any indulgence, the recipient must be baptized, not excommunicated, have the intention of gaining the indulgence, and be in a state of grace at least by the time the indulgenced works are completed (Norm #17). The acts or prescribed works should not be seen as “magical” (forcing God to do something in an automatic way) but as evidence of and aids in conversion of heart (Introduction, 4).

If you do these works by yourself, do they help? Of course! But if you make them part of an indulgence, you are also helped by the prayer of the Church (Norm #4).

The conditions for a plenary indulgence require some brief comments (Norms #20). Confession, Communion, and the prayers for the intentions of the Holy Father (which can be as simple as an *Our Father* and *Hail Mary*) may take place several days before or after the indulgenced work. A single celebration of the Sacrament of Reconciliation may be applied to several indulgences, but Communion and the prayers for the Holy Father may only apply to one. The issue of attachment to sin is the most difficult, and points to the ultimate purpose of indulgences. It means not only committing to avoid sinning, but also includes any affection for or attraction to sin. That does not mean that one is not tempted; it does mean that temptations are immediately set aside and any venial sin is immediately repented of and addressed.

When Pope Paul VI reformed the practice of indulgences after Vatican II, he wanted to stress that what indulgences try to bring about (conversion) should be connected to daily Christian life. Therefore, he provided a new category of partial indulgences: the four general concessions or grants (see the box). It is easy to see what Pope Paul VI was getting at, namely, that the patient and prayerful bearing of adversity, charitable service, self-denial, and giving witness to the faith are part of the Christian life.

The *Manual* lists a number of other indulgenced works or concessions (the specific grants); most are partial but some are plenary. These take the forms of specific prayers or actions, and may be associated with special occasions or events. For example, in the Year of Faith, a special Plenary Indulgence has been granted by the Holy Father; see the box below or go to

Conditions for Gaining a Partial Indulgence

- Be baptized, not excommunicated, and in a state of grace.
- Have the intention of gaining the indulgence (including being contrite)
- Perform the work or offer the prayers as described.
- May be obtained more than once per day.

Conditions for Gaining a Plenary Indulgence

In addition to the above:

- Exclude all attachment to sin
- Go to sacramental confession
- Receive Eucharistic Communion
- Pray for the intentions of the Holy Father
- May only be obtained once per day.

If any component is lacking, the indulgence will be partial.

The Four General Concessions

A partial indulgence is granted to the Christian faithful who:

- (1) while carrying out their duties and enduring the hardships of life, raise their minds in humble trust to God and make, at least mentally, some pious invocation;
- (2) led by the spirit of faith, give compassionately of themselves or of their goods to serve their brothers in need;
- (3) in a spirit of penance, voluntarily abstain from something that is licit for and pleasing to them; and
- (4) in the particular circumstances of daily life, voluntarily give explicit witness to their faith before others.

Plenary Indulgence for The Year of Faith

During the Year of Faith, which will last from 11 October 2012 to 24 November 2013, Plenary Indulgence for the temporal punishment of sins, imparted by the mercy of God and applicable also to the souls of deceased faithful, may be obtained by all faithful who, truly penitent, take Sacramental Confession and the Eucharist and pray in accordance with the intentions of the Supreme Pontiff.

(A) Each time they attend at least three sermons during the Holy Missions, or at least three lessons on the Acts of the Council or the articles of the Catechism of the Catholic Church, in church or any other suitable location.

(B) Each time they visit, in the course of a pilgrimage, a papal basilica, a Christian catacomb, a cathedral church or a holy site designated by the local ordinary for the Year of Faith (for example, minor basilicas and shrines dedicated to the Blessed Virgin Mary, the Holy Apostles or patron saints), and there participate in a sacred celebration, or at least remain for a congruous period of time in prayer and pious meditation, concluding with the recitation of the Our Father, the Profession of Faith in any legitimate form, and invocations to the Blessed Virgin Mary and, depending on the circumstances, to the Holy Apostles and patron saints.

In the Diocese of Davenport, the following churches have also been designated by Bishop Amos as holy sites for pilgrimage in order to obtain the indulgence:

- Clinton Deanery: St. Joseph in DeWitt
- Davenport Deanery: Sacred Heart Cathedral in Davenport
- Grinnell Deanery: St. Mary in Grinnell
- Iowa City Deanery: St. Patrick in Iowa City
- Keokuk Deanery: St. James in St. Paul
- Ottumwa Deanery: St. Patrick in Ottumwa

(C) Each time that, on the days designated by the local ordinary for the Year of Faith, ... in any sacred place, they participate in a solemn celebration of the Eucharist or the Liturgy of the Hours, adding thereto the Profession of Faith in any legitimate form.

In the Diocese of Davenport, the following dates, on which the various Deaneries will be holding their celebration for the Year of Faith, have been designated by Bishop Amos for the obtaining of this indulgence:

- Grinnell Deanery – June 23, 2013
- Keokuk Deanery – July 20, 2013
- Davenport Deanery – September 22, 2013
- Ottumwa Deanery – October 26, 2013
- Clinton Deanery – November 21, 2013

In such manner, even those who cannot be present for the individual deanery celebrations may join themselves to the diocese in prayer and benefit from the indulgence.

(D) On any day they chose, during the Year of Faith, if they make a pious visit to the baptistery, or other place in which they received the Sacrament of Baptism, and there renew their baptismal promises in any legitimate form.

Finally, one particular specific grant needs mention: the indulgence at the time of death. Under ordinary circumstances, the apostolic blessing at the time of death—given by a priest or bishop—carries with it a plenary indulgence. It is usually granted as part of the celebration of Viaticum (Communion of the dying) but may be granted in the context of the Anointing of the Sick or Reconciliation. Importantly, *even if a priest cannot be present*, the Church still extends this indulgence to those Christians who were in the habit of praying regularly, even in the absence of the usual three conditions (Confession, Communion, prayers for the intentions of the Pontiff). The other basic conditions for obtaining a plenary indulgence always apply, including the complete detachment from sin. In other words, far from being some last-minute attempt to magically get into heaven in a manner somehow disconnected from the rest of life, the indulgence teaches that the Church accompanies her children in this final act of conversion, of trustful turning towards and abandonment into God’s hands, with her prayers. Different from other plenary indulgences, it may be gained in addition to other plenary indulgences that day.

Eschatology

Perhaps this is a good point to review what the Church teaches about “the last things,” or “eschatology.” Then we will turn our attention back to how we care for the sick, the dying, the dead, and the bereaved. Of course, much more can be said about eschatology—about death and judgment; about Heaven and Hell and Purgatory—than can fit here. Readers may want to look at the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (CCC) #1020-1050 or at chapter 13 in the *US Catholic Catechism for Adults*. So what follows is, of necessity, just an overview.

What is death? From a strictly biological point of view, death is that moment when an organism stops functioning as a unified whole. Theologically, we talk about death being the objective separation of the body and soul. But there is much more going on here. Subjectively, death is also the end of our individual histories—the time that we can choose for or against God. Death also brings with it our final decision: do we approach it afraid of annihilation and meaninglessness, or do we make our deaths our final act of self-surrender and trust?

Why do we have to die? Again, from a strictly biological point of view, creatures die because they wear out... we are biologically programmed to die in order to make room for following generations. Physical death was around long before humans ever came on the scene. Across the ages, it is death that has allowed life to evolve. From death comes new life... a truth that should be very familiar to us! Theologically, we die because the world is not the way it ought to be; it is damaged by sin. While we do not take Genesis literally, the creation accounts teach some very important truths about who we are, where we come from, and why things are the way they are. Death is, in the end, the result of human sin (Gen 2:17; Rom 6:23; CCC #1008), from the misuse of human freedom and the desire to see ourselves as creator rather than creatures. Death, in this sense, is not a direct punishment of individuals by God; rather, it is contrary to God’s desires for us from the beginning. Therefore, because it is contrary to God, it—in the end—will have no power over us.

Let's return to the image of two persons facing each other. If I am in perfect relationship with God, it is like we are looking at each other face-to-face. If, by sin, I have begun to turn away from God, it is more like I am looking at God askance or out of the corner of my eye. But, if I have turned completely away—what we call mortal sin, or a self-defining decision against God at the core of my being—I no longer see God at all (though God still keeps facing me). Our whole lives are spent in this dance of turning closer and, unfortunately at times, turning away from God. But, with death, that dance ends. We have, by the way we have lived, made a decision for or against God. So, at death, we face what our tradition calls the “particular” judgment. We have either decided for or against God—and that choice has eternal consequences which are “finalized” at the end of time, in what we call the “general” judgment that accompanies resurrection.

Traditionally, we have talked about the consequences of judgment in terms of heaven, hell, and purgatory—and imagined that these words refer to actual places. Much of what we *think* we know about heaven and hell (and purgatory) comes from the popular imagination, and not from official church teaching. In fact, we might be surprised to know that what the church officially teaches about these matters is actually quite limited!

Rather than concrete places, it is better to think about these words as referring to our relationship with God, a state of being. Those who are turned towards God fully, enjoy the fullness of that relationship after death (we call them saints); those who are turned completely away—who have made a definitive decision against God—have made a decision for hell (God does not send anyone to hell; we choose hell by choosing to reject God's offer of friendship). Those who are turned partially away and need help turning fully towards God are in a temporary state called purgatory. Purgatory is not a “waiting room” for heaven; nor is it a “second chance” – but the final purification or preparation of those already destined for the fullness of salvation. Keeping to our metaphor, purgatory is the act of turning towards God.

And such a turning can be painful. Because purgatory is not literally a place, we must also not take the idea of the “fires” or “pains” of purgatory literally either. Instead think of the pains that accompany separation, when we are apart from those we love the most. Purgatory includes that sense of temporary separation from God, a separation that we have brought about by our own decisions. As mentioned before, we can aid our beloved dead in their journey of continuing conversion by our prayers, especially by the Eucharist and by those particular prayers that we refer to as indulgences.

At the end of time, we become embodied again; we call that the resurrection (CCC 998, 1038). For those who are in relationship with God, that means an eternity in God's presence, part of a new heaven and a new earth; resurrection life. What such a “glorified” body is like, we have no idea—but I think the point is that in eternal life we retain our particularity and our identity. The scriptures tell us that our bodies will be like Christ's, but that doesn't help much with specifics!

But for those who have turned completely away, it is only the resurrection to eternal death that awaits them. Yet, unlike heaven and the saints, the Church has never taught that any specific person is actually

“in” hell. So, following the example of the saints, while we have to allow for the possibility of hell if human freedom is going to mean anything (CCC 1035-37), let us hope and pray that no one suffers such a fate—that hell is ultimately “empty”—and that no one has made such a final, radical, and irredeemable decision against God.

Pastoral Care of the Sick & the Sacrament of Anointing of the Sick

So far, we have covered sin and healing from sin’s effects: the Sacrament of Reconciliation and Indulgences. We have summarized the Church’s teaching on death. As I mentioned there, theologically, death is a consequence of the sin that affects creation, a consequence of our brokenness. So, too, is illness. Our bodies are finite; life will end in bodily death... and on the way we will experience all sorts of limitations: physical, emotional/psychological, spiritual.

Following the example of Jesus, the Church also reaches out to minister to us on this journey, at these times of crisis, in sacramental and non-sacramental ways. Certainly, as individuals and as parish communities, we are called upon to help meet the physical or material needs of those who are ill or dying, of their families, and of the bereaved. Going shopping, helping with transportation or child care, providing for meals or for time away—these are all part of pastoral care to the sick and dying, and to their families. But the focus of this series is how we extend this care liturgically and, in particular, sacramentally.

Letter of James 5:13-16

Is anyone among you suffering? He should pray. Is anyone in good spirits? He should sing praise. Is anyone among you sick? He should summon the presbyters of the church, and they should pray over him and anoint (him) with oil in the name of the Lord, and the prayer of faith will save the sick person, and the Lord will raise him up. If he has committed any sins, he will be forgiven. Therefore, confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may be healed. The fervent prayer of a righteous person is very powerful.

The ritual book, *Pastoral Care of the Sick: Rites of Anointing and Viaticum* provides rites both during time of illness and as death approaches. The first part of the book focuses on ministering to the sick, providing model rites for prayer during visits to the sick (including sick children) as well as for priests and deacons who are bringing communion to the sick at home or in hospitals.

As with all the sacraments, Anointing of the Sick is rooted in Jesus’ ministry. Just as Jesus healed the sick, the Church has, from its earliest days, cared for those who were ill. In the Letter of James (see the box to the left), we read specifically that in times of illness believers were encouraged to seek out the prayers of the community and anointing by the elders (presbyters).

As you might expect, the details of how this sacrament has been celebrated over the ages has changed over time. Early on, the oil was used internally as well as externally—and the

fact that the oil was blessed by the bishop was more important than who did the actual anointing (as seen in a letter written by Pope Innocent I to bishop Decentius of Gubbio).

Today, the Church has recently clarified that only priests (presbyters and bishops) may administer this sacrament because it is so closely tied to the forgiveness of sins. However, this does not mean that the priest ought to act alone. As with all the sacraments, the presence of the community is presumed.

Many probably still remember that this sacrament used to be called “Extreme Unction” and was celebrated only when one was near death. After Vatican II, we recovered the more ancient emphasis of the sacrament: the strengthening and healing of the sick. So, contrary to lingering popular belief, the Anointing of the Sick is not the primary sacrament of the dying (that’s *Viaticum* – which will be covered next week).

While no longer a sacrament just for the dying, the Anointing of the Sick is not to be used arbitrarily. Only those who are suffering from a serious illness, or whose health is seriously impaired by old age, ought to be anointed. Should one’s condition worsen, the sacrament may be repeated. Serious mental illness may be a reason for anointing, as is upcoming surgery for a serious cause. At the same time, the Rite warns us that by using the word “seriously” the Church wants “to avoid restrictions upon the celebration of the sacrament. On the one hand, the sacrament may and should be given to anyone whose health is seriously impaired; on the other, it may not be given indiscriminately to any person whose health is not seriously impaired.”

The sacrament itself consists of the prayer of faith, the laying on of hands, and anointing with olive (or other plant) oil blessed by the bishop at the Chrism Mass (though a priest may bless oil for a given occasion if necessary). As the priest anoints the forehead of the sick person, he says: “Through this holy anointing may the Lord in his love and mercy help you with the grace of the Holy Spirit.” These words come from the Council of Trent. As he anoints the sick person’s hands, he says: “May the Lord who frees you from sin save you and raise you up.” These words come from the Letter of James.

What are the effects of the sacrament? Healing in its many dimensions: relational, spiritual, emotional, and, yes, possibly even physical (see the box). The second part of *Pastoral Care of the Sick* focuses on prayers and rites to accompany the dying.

Effects of the Sacrament of Anointing of the Sick

Catechism of the Catholic Church #1532

The special grace of the sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick has as its effects:

- ❖ the uniting of the sick person to the passion of Christ, for his own good and that of the whole Church;
- ❖ the strengthening, peace, and courage to endure in a Christian manner the sufferings of illness or old age;
- ❖ the forgiveness of sins, if the sick person was not able to obtain it through the sacrament of Penance;
- ❖ the restoration of health, if it is conducive to the salvation of his soul;
- ❖ the preparation for passing over to eternal life.

Pastoral Care of the Dying / *Viaticum*

I mentioned above that the primary sacrament for the dying is not Anointing, but viaticum: Holy Communion as bread for the journey from this life to the next.

Definition:

“*Viaticum*: The Holy Eucharist when received by a dying person as the spiritual food for one’s passing from this world to the Father.”
(US Catholic Catechism for Adults, p. 531)

Part II of the ritual book *Pastoral Care of the Sick* (PCS) provides numerous resources for ministering to the dying and their loved ones. For example, the “Commendation of the Dying” provides short scriptural texts, litanies, and prayers to accompany the dying in their last moments. Prayers are also provided for those moments after death, especially if this is the first time that a minister could be present (sacraments are not celebrated for the dead; so it is inappropriate to anoint

or baptize someone who has already died). Rites are provided for initiation of the dying, as well as for ministering to a dying child and his or her family.

But the heart of these rites is viaticum—“the last sacrament of Christian Life” (PCS #175). In fact, we are reminded that “all baptized Christians who are able to receive communion are bound to receive viaticum by reason of the precept to receive communion when in danger of death from any cause (PCS #27). Therefore, those who care for the sick, including family members, ought to help make sure that viaticum is not delayed—so the dying are still able to receive communion and take part fully in the rite. Sometimes, for medical reasons, it may be necessary to commune with only a small fragment of a Host or with the Precious Blood (which may be reserved for the sick; see *Norms for the Distribution and Reception of Holy Communion under both Kinds in the Dioceses of the United States of America* #54) instead.

The word viaticum literally means to take with you on a journey (*via*). So it originally referred to a meal for those taking a journey or provisions for travel. Over time, it came to mean a farewell meal at death or even the fare paid for the voyage after life (usually in the form of a coin put in the mouth of the deceased). Christians borrowed the word, and applied it first to sustenance for the journey of life and then broadly to any spiritual aid to the dying. Eventually, the word came to refer specifically to Communion of a dying Christian. Even the idea of “fare” did not escape the popular imagination; the abusive practice of placing the Eucharist in the mouth of deceased persons had to be addressed by a number of local church councils. The importance of communion at the time of death is highlighted by its mention in a number of stories about the saints, including St. Ambrose and St. Benedict.

As with other sacraments, the way viaticum has been celebrated has changed over time. The reading of the Passion was important in the early Middle Ages; later the *Confiteor* and profession of faith were added. The Roman Ritual of 1614 placed viaticum with communion for the sick, before anointing of the sick, which led to confusion regarding the purpose of viaticum and was one factor in making anointing

rather than viaticum the sacrament of the dying. The reforms of Vatican II restored these sacraments to their initial order.

Ideally, viaticum is celebrated within Mass, but when that is not possible, it may be celebrated outside of Mass. As with all the sacraments, even outside of Mass this is to be a communal celebration: family, friends, and even other members of the parish community should take part.

There are some important additions to the Rite of Viaticum that makes it different than the usual rite for bringing communion to the sick. Importantly, the priest may give the indulgenced apostolic pardon or blessing for the dying (see above). Further differences include other options for inviting the faithful to communion, for example: “Jesus Christ is the food for our journey; he calls us to the heavenly table;” the minister saying: “May the Lord Jesus Christ protect you and lead you to eternal life” immediately after the dying person receives viaticum; and, outside of Mass, the sign of peace being given at the end of the rite, after the blessing.

Of particular note, the dying person has the opportunity to renew his or her baptismal promises. This is probably the most significant addition: this is the faith in which the person was baptized; by recalling that faith now, he or she is strengthened as death approaches—for it is that faith which is the way to eternal life. Interestingly, it was an early practice that when monks approached death the community would gather around him and repeat the creed over and over... sustaining his faith as death approached with the faith of the community. We do something similar here.

Finally, it ought to be noted that the ordinary minister of viaticum is the person’s pastor (and his assisting priests), priest chaplains, and priest religious superiors (in their own house); in case of necessity, another priest, a deacon, or an extraordinary minister of Holy Communion may celebrate the rite (either getting permission from the pastor first or, in cases of emergency, informing him afterwards; PCS #29). In other words, viaticum is a special responsibility of pastors—as is the celebration of the Church’s funeral rites.

The Order of Christian Funerals

Why do we have funerals? The *Order of Christian Funerals (OCF)* gives three reasons: in its funeral rites “[1] the Church intercedes on behalf of the deceased... and [2] ministers to the sorrowing and consoles them... with the comforting word of God and the sacrament of the eucharist” as well as [3] offers “worship, praise, and thanksgiving to God for the gift of a life which has now returned to God” (OCF 4-5).

In order to do all three of these well, we need to remember: funerals are not about the deceased (or those who mourn them). Just as weddings are not about the couple (or the bride); just as Baptisms, First Communion and Confirmations are not about the kids or teens. They are not the center of attention, the focus, of the liturgy. Now, before you all start writing letters to the editor, hear me out! I am not saying that we ought to ignore the deceased or the bereaved, couples or kids; that they are not important; that funerals or weddings ought to be generic. What I am saying is that our *focus* in the

liturgy must always be on Christ, and on his Paschal Mystery. It is Christ, in the power of the Holy Spirit, who mediates our encounter with the Father.

Think of a pair of glasses. If we look *through* them, we see clearly what we ought to see. If we try to focus on the glasses themselves, what we are supposed to be looking at gets blurry, distorted, out of focus. What the deceased and the bereaved are at funerals are the *lenses* that help us focus on Christ at this particular time and in this particular place. Couples at weddings and kids at the sacraments of initiation do the same thing. They ought not replace Christ as the focus, but help us to focus on Christ in a particular way. If we focus on them, Christ gets blurred, distorted.

So far from ignoring the dead or the bereaved at funerals (or the couple at a wedding, etc.), they are crucial. Funerals and weddings ought *not* be generic. But they ought to be about Christ—as encountered or revealed in the life of *this* faithful Christian that has died, of *this* community that mourns him or her. In other words, we attend to what is particular—*this* deceased person, *these* mourners—not in and of themselves, but only as part of something bigger. That’s why the term “celebration of life service” ought to have no place in the Catholic lexicon, and why eulogies are not permitted at Catholic funerals. We do not celebrate the life of the deceased in and of themselves or speak in remembrance of them in an exaggerated way, but recall their lives as a sign of *God’s* grace and generosity, of God’s presence and action in the world. We do not celebrate the liturgy as an exercise in isolated self-expression, but only as an expression of the faith of the Church; that is why the Church regulates—and must regulate—what is said, sung, or done at funerals (and weddings).

In the Catholic way of celebrating funerals, we have three core Rites: the Vigil, the Funeral, and the Committal. In fact, it is best to think of this sequence not as three separate liturgies but as one liturgy in three parts—like the Easter Triduum. In addition to these core rites, the OCF provides the minister with a number of other resources, such as prayers after death, for the first time the family gathers in the presence of the body, and at the time the body is transferred to the church.

This core sequence of rites—one liturgy in three stations—is indeed one of the most remarkable achievements of the liturgical reform. Why? Because in its very structure—three stations separated by processions—it mirrors the journey of life and the journey of grief. It is structured like a lament, and thus helps mourners not only express their grief but also begin the journey of integration

If we look at the lament psalms in the Bible, we see this common pattern: the psalmist cries out his present pain, looks back in faith and recounts the good that God has done for him (or for the people); and, because of God’s faithfulness in the past, the psalmist can look to the future with hope. The OCF does the same thing. While each of the major rites attends to the past, present, and future—and ministers to the bereaved, gives praise and worship to God, and prays for the dead—the vigil, funeral, and committal each have their particular emphasis on one of the three.

Interestingly, contemporary studies on grief and loss also speak of promoting healthy mourning by allowing for the expression of grief (present), remembrance of the deceased (past), and the opportunity

to make meaning (integrate the loss; future)—the very pattern that we find in the OCF. Please see the table below for a synopsis of what I am presenting here.

At the Vigil, the ministry of the Church in accompanying mourners in their bewilderment, shock, and grief is stressed. These rites focus on the present, and are intended to help “mourners express their sorrow and to find strength and consolation” in the paschal mystery of Christ (OCF 52). The importance of the Christian community’s support to the mourners is emphasized, as is the centrality of the word of God as source of consolation (OCF 51, 56, 59-60). In addition to the version of the Vigil found in the main part of the OCF, the Office for the Dead from the Liturgy of the Hours may be used instead. If necessary, the Vigil (either version) may be repeated.

At the Funeral Liturgy (within or outside of Mass), our emphasis shifts from present to past, to giving “praise and thanks to God for Christ’s victory over sin and death: and on commending “the deceased to God’s tender mercy and compassion” (OCF 129), especially in the Final Commendation (OCF 146). The funeral recalls the past in order to comfort in the present and open up a new future. By viewing the great deeds of God in the past through the lens of the life of the deceased, God’s past promises can once again be embraced, here and now.

The Rite of Committal emphasizes hope in the face of the stark and final reality of death (OCF 206, 209). Our attention on the past and present gives way to a focus on the eschatological future, on the promise of the Resurrection. That’s why the actual interment of the body is a *part of the rite itself*; we need to face that reality, to be part of that final letting go. It should not be left to later, with only strangers in attendance.

Movement itself is an important part of the ritual. Typically we would move from the place of the Vigil to the church, and from church to cemetery. This movement reminds us of the journey through life as well as the journey through grief. The OCF states that “[t]he procession to the church is a rite of initial separation from the deceased; the procession to the place of committal is the journey to the place of final separation of the mourners from the deceased” (OCF 120). That’s why the OCF also includes prayers for this times (as mentioned above).

Taken as a whole, the OCF is a rite of transition: it moves us out of one identity, through an in-between time, and then reintegrates into the community with a new identity. We see this commonly in the RCIA: through the Rite of Acceptance, one moves out of their former life as an unbaptized individual into the catechumenate, an in-between time. At the Easter Vigil, through the sacraments of initiation, one becomes a neophyte. We do the same thing with marriage (single→engaged→married) and with Holy Orders (layman→candidate for orders→deacon/priest). In the middle, or liminal (in-between) phase, other rites are celebrated to move one through the transition. The OCF does the same thing.

The Vigil is a rite of separation, moving us—mourner and deceased alike—from “life as usual” before death to the in-between time before burial. The Funeral is a rite of transition. The deceased is no longer living in this world and is not yet commended to the next or committed to the earth or the long-term

memory of the community. For mourners, life before this death has ended; life after this death, the day-in and day-out routines that will need to be learned without this loved one physically present, is yet to begin. The Committal serves to begin the integration of the living into life after the death of a loved one, incorporating them in the community with their new identities as widow(er) instead of spouse, orphan instead of child. Likewise, the deceased is also incorporated into the community in a new way: in memory, and as part of the Church outside of time.

These rites function well—do what they are supposed to do—as long as they are celebrated as an integral whole... and with the particularity of the deceased person and the mourners in mind. One of the most underused resources in the OCF is the prayers in the appendix. There, in the back of the OCF, you will find prayers that were written with particular persons in mind: a deceased cleric or religious, for children or young persons or the elderly, for parents and married couples, for husbands and wives. There are also prayers appropriate for specific situations: for those who died after a long illness or for those who died suddenly, for those who died accidentally or violently or by suicide.

In 1997, an Appendix on Cremation was added to the OCF. The Church honors the human body even after death; it can be said that the body is the “sacrament” of the person—our bodies are how we are made present to others. Therefore, there is a strong preference for burial in the Christian tradition, especially since Jesus, too, was buried.

Because of the honor we pay the body, universal law does not allow funerals in the presence of cremated remains. In the United States, we have an exception to that rule and the Bishop may allow for such (as is done in this diocese). Regardless, it is clear that the Church prefers that the Vigil and Funeral be celebrated with the body present. If celebrated in the presence of cremated remains (not “cremains”; see below) there are some adjustments to the rite and prayers.

It must be mentioned that any action that turns the body into a “thing”—a commodity—for us to manipulate is not permitted. Even the term “cremains” subtly (or not so subtly) does this very thing. Scattering the ashes, dividing them up, making them into other objects, or even keeping the urn with cremated remains in the home are therefore not permitted. We would never do these things with a body before cremation; we ought not do so with a body after. Not only do these practices disrespect the body, the sacrament of the person, but in some subtle ways may reflect our misdirected desire to control death and deny its finality. Our faith in the Resurrection calls us to more than that.

The Order of Christian Funerals as a Rite of Passage and Lament

(From: Francis L. Agnoli, “ ‘First of All, Do No Harm’ – Lament in the Development of a Gentle Funeral Homiletic” (D.Min. thesis, Aquinas Institute of Theology, 2009), 54.

| Rite of Passage | Catholic Rites | Focus of the OCF | Lament (Paschal Mystery) |
|--|---|---|--|
| Pre-liminal ↓ Rites of Separation ↓ | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pastoral Care of the Sick (e.g., Anointing of the Sick, Viaticum) • Commendation of the Dying • Prayers after Death • Prayers in the Presence of the Body • Vigil • Transfer of the Body • Procession to Church | To “minister to the sorrowing” (OCF §4) | <i>The Present:</i> Complaint. Naming of the hurt or reason for suffering. (Good Friday) |
| Liminal Rites of Transition | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reception of the Body • Funeral • Rite of Commendation | To offer “worship, praise, and thanksgiving to God for the gift of a life which has now been returned to God” (OCF §3) | <i>The Past:</i> Petition / anamnesis: the deeds of God are recalled, giving cause for hope. Submission. (Holy Saturday) |
| ↓ Rites of Incorporation ↓ Post-liminal | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Procession to Place of Burial • Rite of Committal • Anniversary and Memorial Masses • All Souls Day | To “intercede on behalf of the deceased” (OCF §4) | <i>The Future:</i> Relinquishment. The vow of praise / thanks. A sense of assurance. (Easter Sunday) |

The past, present, and future – as well as ministry to the sorrowing, the offering of praise and thanks to God, and intercession for the dead—are part of all three rites. The table shows which aspect is emphasized at the Vigil, Funeral, and Committal (and their associated rites).