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PASTORAL LETTER NOVEMBER 2014

CALLED HOME TO GOD: PASTORAL GUIDELINES FOR CATHOLIC FUNERALS

To all the faithful, religious, deacons and priests:

*May the God of peace, who brought up from the dead ... Jesus our
Lord, furnish you with all that is good.*

(Hebrews 13:21-22)

[1] The catacombs of ancient Rome wind their way underground for three hundred and seventy-five miles. They stand in silent witness to the beliefs of the first Christians. When Christians from the first to the fifth century used these subterranean chambers to house their dead, they were deliberately distancing their burial practices from those of their pagan neighbors.

[2] Pagan Romans cremated their dead. They buried the ashes either in a family tomb or a common vault known as a *columbarium*. Christians, however, chose not to cremate their deceased. Instead, they followed the example of burial found in Sacred Scripture.

[3] When his beloved wife Sarah died, Abraham, the father of the Chosen People, purchased a burial plot with a cave at Machpelah in the land of Canaan. There he buried his wife (Gen 23:1-20). Isaac and Ishmael later buried Abraham in the same cave (Gen 25:9) as did Joseph, his father Jacob (Gen 50:2). Miriam (Num 20:1); Moses (Deut 34:5-8); Joshua (Josh 24:30); Samuel (1 Sam 25:1) and David (1 Kg 2:10) were all buried and not cremated.

[4] In the time of Jesus, the Jews continued the same burial practices. When Herod beheaded John the Baptist, John's disciples came and took his body and reverently buried it in a tomb (Mt 14:12). The dead Lazarus was placed in "a cave, and a stone lay on it" (John 11:38). And, Jesus himself was buried in a new tomb, hewn out of the rock, which Joseph of Arimathea had prepared for himself (Mt 27:57-60; Mark 15:46; John 19:41-42).

[5] Christians followed the Jewish practice of burying the dead. Their pagan neighbors were amazed at the sense of joy and peace that surrounded Christian burials. St. Jerome tells us that, when St. Paul the Anchorite of Thebes was buried, they wrapped his body and carried it to the grave, singing hymns and psalms. (cf. St. Jerome, *The Life of Paulus the First Hermit*, 16). The pagans also noticed that Christians would even give a decent burial to the poor whose families could not afford the expenses. Unlike the pagans, Christians did not cremate the bodies of the poor and dump their ashes into a common grave.

[6] Funeral rites are important. On a human level, ritualized mourning shows respect for the dead, comforts those left behind and leads the bereaved back to normal life. On a spiritual level, funeral rites provide the occasion during which a faith community expresses its beliefs in the face of death and offers healing and comfort to those left behind.

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[7] Today, we are beginning to witness a minimizing and even elimination of rituals surrounding death and burial. An increasing number of Catholics are breaking away from traditional Catholic funerals. There are a number of reasons for this growing trend.

[8] First, the secularization of society. God's design for birth and marriage finds no place in court decisions and recent laws. With increasing ferocity, even the discussion of God is being banned from the public forum. This radical divorce of religious beliefs from current debates surrounding birth and marriage diminishes the importance of faith in dealing with death.

[9] Second, a strong sense of individualism in our culture. Some hold that every individual has total authority over his or her life. Each person has the right, therefore, to live and die as he or she sees fit. The individual is sovereign. There is no need of community. In living and dying, it is the individual that matters first and foremost. The faith community and its practices are secondary.

[10] Third, the removal of death from our view. Most deaths take place outside the home, in hospitals or nursing homes. The dead are waked in funeral homes. The stark reality of death itself is cosmetically disguised. By keeping death and dying at a distance, we avoid facing the existential anxiety of our own demise. In fact, the quicker the funeral can be done, the less time we have to face death.

[11] Fourth, the general decline in religious practice. Church attendance is down. Many no longer recognize an obligation to attend Mass on Sundays and Holy Days; and, they are teaching their children by example to think the same. Sadly, because their children have fallen away from attending Mass, parents who have attended church regularly all their life are now being denied the spiritual benefit of a funeral Mass. It is now becoming necessary for those who want a full Catholic funeral to leave that instruction for family members.

[12] Fifth and the most important, a loss of faith. Imbued with materialism, many have lost the sense of transcendence. They no longer see the human person as destined for more than this world can offer. Death is simply the end, not a transition to life with God.

[13] Nonetheless, death still remains a reality and must be faced. Catholic funeral rites offer the bereaved a needed time to grieve and to strengthen their faith. They offer those left behind a way to face death by celebrating life in Christ. They provide a needed moment to affirm the basic truths of faith at a painful moment. When the rites are followed, they offer a faith-filled way to find meaning, to remember and to pray for the deceased and to move forward with hope.

[14] As Catholics, we celebrate our funeral rites to praise and thank God, the author of all life, for the gift of life given the individual whom he has now called to the fullness of life in Christ. Through our funeral rites, we also show our respect for the person we love. We treat the body of the deceased "with respect and charity, in faith and hope of the Resurrection. The burial of the dead is a corporal work of mercy; it honors the children of God, who are temples of the Holy Spirit. ..." (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2300-2301).

[15] Catholic funeral rites include a wake, a funeral, and committal. Let us look at each of these elements. Together, they are one action of handing our loved ones back to God and comforting each other with the assurances of faith.

The Wake

[16] In the past, after a person died, family and friends kept vigil over the body. In days when medical science was not as advanced as today, the wake, that is, the standing watch over the body, assured the family that their loved one had truly died. It also served to keep the body safe until burial.

[17] Today, wakes that once took place in the home of the deceased now take place in funeral homes or in the church. And, there is the trend to shorten the wake or eliminate it completely. This does not help the grieving process.

[18] The wake has value. It gives people a chance to show their respect for the deceased by visiting with the family in the presence of the deceased's body. Sharing memories, happy moments and stories about the deceased brings consolation and support to the bereaved. The wake is an appropriate place for eulogies that honor the memory of the deceased.

[19] During the wake, the prayer service turns the mourners' attention to God who has created each of us to find fulfillment in heaven. And, such prayer benefits the dead. As Sacred Scripture teaches, "It is...a holy and wholesome thought to pray for the dead, that they may be loosed from their sins" (2 Mc 12:46). In death as in life, we are bound together and can help one another with our prayers.

The Funeral Mass

[20] The most important element of Catholic funeral rites is the funeral liturgy. *Mass at the death of a loved one should never be omitted.* It is the greatest act of worship and praise that we can offer God. It is our way of sharing in Christ's victory over sin and death. It is the most efficacious prayer we can offer for the deceased.

[21] The Eucharist is the Paschal Mystery celebrated in our midst. It is our sharing in Christ's Passover from death to life. Every Eucharist makes present to us Jesus on Calvary as he dies for us. Every Eucharist makes present to us Jesus, risen from the dead. Every Eucharist renews our hope that, at death, "life is changed not ended, and, when this earthly dwelling turns to dust, an eternal dwelling is made ready [for us] in heaven" (*Preface I for the Dead*).

[22] At the Eucharistic table, we are united with our beloved dead in the Communion of Saints. Death separates us from those we love. The Eucharist keeps us united. The spiritual bond of all the baptized is not severed in death. The prayerful celebration of the funeral Mass makes us experience the communion of love and faith that we have with each other and with our beloved dead.

[23] Our faith teaches that, at death, "the body separates from the soul, the human body decays, and the soul goes to meet God, while awaiting its reunion with its glorified body" (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 997). At the moment of death, we are judged. We see our whole life in the light of God's truth. This is called the particular judgment.

[24] If we die in a state of total alienation from God, we remain in that condition in hell. If we die in a state of perfect charity, we enter the blessedness of heaven immediately. If we have led good lives and are not perfected in our charity at death, we experience the purifying love of God in purgatory before entering the Presence of God in heaven.

[25] Pope St. John Paul II said: "Those who live in this state of purification after death are not separated from God but are immersed in the love of Christ. Neither are they separated from the saints in heaven...nor from us on earth... We all remain united in the Mystical Body of Christ, and we can therefore offer up prayers and good works on behalf of our brothers and sisters in purgatory" (General Audience, August 4, 1999).

[26] Our beloved dead benefit from our prayers of intercession, especially the Mass. We should pray for the dead and also have Masses said for them as well. On a few days of the year, liturgical law does not allow a funeral Mass, e.g. on Holy Thursday, Good Friday and Holy Saturday. Nonetheless, a funeral liturgy outside of Mass should be celebrated. At a later date, family and friends should gather to celebrate Mass for the deceased.

[27] The growing custom of substituting prayers at the funeral home or at the graveside for a funeral Mass deprives the deceased and the living of the spiritual benefits of the Eucharist. *It should not be encouraged.* When families express no desire for a funeral Mass, all those who arrange for funerals, most especially clergy, should explain the great value of the funeral Mass, even for those who have been lax in their faith. They should do *all that is possible* to encourage the bereaved to celebrate a funeral Mass. Their encouragement and instruction can lead the faithful to a greater appreciation of the richness of grace given us in the Church.

[28] While words of remembrance by a friend or family member are permitted by the Order of Christian Funerals, the practice has evolved into an interruption of the funeral Mass and has become a source of even greater emotional distress to grief stricken family members rather than a consolation at the moment when we are to "comfort one another with assurances of faith." *Therefore, in the Diocese of Paterson, those planning funerals should make every effort to locate any brief words of remembrance before the liturgy begins.*

Committal

[29] Our bodies are sacred. In the saving waters of baptism, our body is washed. It is anointed with the

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chrisms of salvation and nourished on the Eucharist, the food of immortality. In life, it is the very dwelling place of God. As St. Augustine teaches, "The bodies of the dead are not ... to be despised and left unburied..." (St. Augustine, *City of God* I.13). The body is not a mere husk to be cast away or a useless garment to be discarded. If we treasure and honor the pictures of our beloved dead, how much more their very bodies!

[30] Because the body is so sacred, the Church clearly prefers that the body of the deceased be present for the funeral rites. (*Order of Christian Funerals*, 413-418) Families who opt for cremation should be strongly encouraged to bring the body of the deceased to Church. Cremation best takes place *after* the funeral Mass and the Prayers of Committal. This order gives full expression to our belief in the sacredness of the body and the hope of the Resurrection.

[31] The first Christians called their catacombs "*Koimeteria*." The word *koimeterion* means dormitory, the place where you go to bed at night and rise in the morning. Those first believers saw the catacombs as just a resting place for the body that would certainly rise up when the final day dawns. They also mark their tombs with the word *Depositus* (deposited), sometimes abbreviated as the letter *D*. The dead were "deposited," that is, placed like grains of wheat in the earth to be awakened to new life on the last day.

[32] Thus, in keeping with the Church's tradition of respect for the body, even cremains should receive proper burial. They are not to be scattered over land or sea nor are they to be kept at home. They are not to be split up among family members nor are they to be encased in jewelry to be worn by their loved ones. They are to be reverently "deposited" in a cemetery or mausoleum to await the Resurrection of the dead, together with all those who have gone before and after them.

[33] To help all Catholics appreciate and embrace the Church's funeral practice, it is highly recommended that every parish have a ministry that reaches out to its members at the time of death. When deaths occur, the faithful are also encouraged to notify the parish. In this way, a priest, deacon or other suitable parish minister can be present to the bereaved as soon as possible to give comfort and to assist, along with the professional funeral director, in preparing the complete funeral rites. Needless to say, the faithful should contact a priest *before* someone dies so that the dying person can be properly prepared to die with the comfort and strength of the sacraments.

[34] The Church's care for her children at the moment of death is never a matter of rules and regulations. Rather, it is faith in action. It is believers accompanying other believers with compassion and charity at the moment their loved ones are called home to God.

Given at the Pastoral Center of the Diocese of Paterson, on The Commemoration of All the Faithful Departed, the second day of November in the year of Our Lord, two thousand and fourteen.

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