

OFFICE OF THE BISHOP

DIocese OF LAFAYETTE

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LAFAYETTE, LOUISIANA 70502-3387

TELEPHONE: 337-261-5614 FAX: 337-261-5603

May 12, 2017

Via Email to: All Priests and Deacons, Diocese of Lafayette

Re: Celebrating Masses of Christian Burial in Parish Churches

Dear Brothers in Ministry:

Burying the deceased is a Corporal Work of Mercy and has been part of the Church's pastoral work from the very beginning (*Catechism*, no. 2447). Death has been vanquished by Jesus Christ's resurrection and His promise that all who follow Him will share in a like resurrection to new and everlasting life (Romans 6:5). The Church's funeral rites emphasize this essential truth of Christianity in the three stations of the funeral rite: the vigil, the funeral mass, and the graveside service.

The Christian funeral is a liturgical celebration of the Church. The ministry of the Church in this instance aims at expressing efficacious communion with *the deceased*, at the participation in that communion of *the community* gathered for the funeral, and at the proclamation of eternal life to the community. (*Catechism*, no. 1684)

The funeral of a loved one presents us as pastors of souls with a wonderful opportunity to catechize those who attend the funeral and to assure the family of the deceased of the entire Church's solicitude and support in their time of need. In an emotional time like a funeral, extra pastoral sensitivity is required of us. Many times family members or friends of the deceased have not been practicing their faith, may be of other faiths or have no faith at all. The opportunity for pastoral outreach and evangelization is full of possibilities simply because in the face of death and grief human beings are drawn into the true perspective of faith in the risen Christ (*Catechism*, no. 1687).

Unfortunately, the medicalization, privatization, and secularization of death and dying are becoming more and more the norm. Inherent in these "efficiencies" is the escapist desire to make death invisible and convenient, "getting over it as quickly as possible." I suggest to you that what is at stake is the avoidance of the mystery of death and the loss of the spiritual and emotional benefits experienced when ritual and grief are authentically integrated. Some parents

do not even bring their children to wakes, thereby depriving the little ones of the opportunity to consider the bigger picture of life, death and eternity. Fortunately, the Church has been praying and reflecting on these mysteries since the salvific events of Holy Week, culminating in the proclamation of the Lord's resurrection.

It is for this reason that I ask you to be very attentive to celebrating the Funeral Rites of the Church as the Church intends. These rites have been carefully prepared and faithfully handed on. For example, the Vigil and/or Rosary before the funeral Mass can be a time of prayer, reflection and consolation. If a family requests time for a eulogy, it is also an appropriate time for that.

“A funeral for any deceased member of the faithful must generally be celebrated in his or her parish church.” (Canon 1177, §1) Therefore, the funeral Mass should always be celebrated in the parish church of the deceased. The Church building and the altar are symbols of Christ and our communion *with* and *in* Him. These eschatological symbols emphasize that it is through the Church, the body of Christ, that we are reborn in Baptism, nourished with the Bread of Life in the Eucharist, forgiven of sin in Penance, and finally ushered to eternal life by the family of the Church. Only on a rare occasion and for a serious reason should a funeral Mass be conducted in a funeral home. Such a case would be of an aged spouse of the deceased or the *grave inconvenience* of transporting a physically handicapped relative. Again, I expect that this should be the exception, not the norm.

I ask that you work with funeral directors, who offer such beautiful and professional assistance to the deceased and the bereaved, to encourage families to experience the full beauty of our Catholic liturgical traditions. These, our friends and colleagues, who work at funeral homes share our calling to help families in fragile moments. The vast majority of funeral home personnel are also compassionate believers (in many cases Catholics and Christians) who also see their work as a privileged vocation in the community. It is vital to develop and nourish a positive and affable relationship with these co-workers. We must do our best to explain our Traditions and to develop lines of prompt communication even sharing our cell phone numbers with the understanding that they will use private contacts with a sensitivity to the busy lives that clergy live today.

In the rare event of the funeral Mass being celebrated in a funeral home, the clergy officiant is to notify the proper pastor that this will take place. The funeral record is to be entered in the parish journal where the funeral home is located and in the funeral record of the priest who is offering the funeral Mass. The mere convenience of having everything in one place is not a reason to forego having the funeral Mass in the parish Church. What a wonderful opportunity to explain our faith in our redemption won in Christ while also forming or strengthening ties with the local parish community.

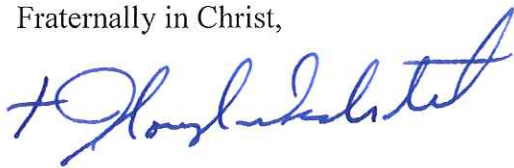
Put another way, let's consider that the typical deceased Catholic is nearly always baptized *in the church*, celebrates their first Confession *in the church*, receives their first Holy Communion *in the church* (nearly in the spot where the casket lays), is confirmed with the Holy Chrism *in the church*, (if married) professes their nuptial vows *in the church*, walks repeatedly the Stations of the Cross *in the church*, kneels and prays before the tabernacle joined by family and parishioners (in good times and bad) *in the church*—and now (confoundingly), their final commendation and Mass of Christian burial is offered *in the funeral home*. Surely, only a serious and exceptional reason could suffice for a reason!

Routinely separating the funeral rites from the parish church, deprives the un-churched, disaffected Catholics and persons with different faith beliefs from encountering a living community and the transcendent symbolism of the house of God. I have witnessed many people return to Mass after the death of a loved one because they experienced once again the pull of eternal life, support in grief and the need for the grace of the Sacraments. Consider also, that for some people, a Catholic funeral might be the only occasion to cross the threshold of a Catholic church. Let's give God's holy people the benefit of our Catholic Traditions.

Finally, the graveside service, the last farewell, should be done according to the *Order of Christian Funerals*, adapting the prayers and customs according to the legitimate options offered. Emphasis should be placed on the truth that Christ by His resurrection has made the grave a sign of hope in our own resurrection to eternal life.

I praise God frequently that I am able to share ministry with such a zealous fraternity of priests and deacons in a most wonderful Diocese. Thank you for your attention to this important part of our priestly ministry.


Fraternally in Christ,



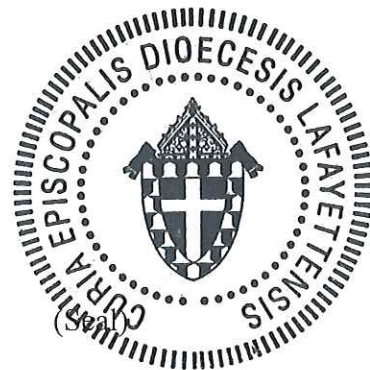
Most Reverend J. Douglas Deshotel, D.D.
Bishop of Lafayette

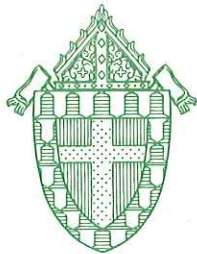
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Copy: Local Funeral Directors



Mrs. Maureen K. Fontenot, PHR, SHRM-CP
Chancellor





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May 12, 2016

To: All Funeral Homes
Located in the Diocese of Lafayette

My Dear Friends,

As the new Bishop of the Catholic Diocese of Lafayette, I wish to earnestly thank you for the service that you offer to our people. In my experience exceptional funeral directors are selfless professionals who are aware of a God-given calling. Our clergy tell me about how so many of you are true experts when it comes to caring for the deceased, and their loved ones. Faithfully lived, yours is a very selfless vocation which not everyone is equipped to do.

Those who have served the bereaved for many years know that there is an unfortunate trend to secularize death, that is, to separate death from the mysteries of faith. When the sacred is removed from the grieving process, bizarre and sacrilegious practices skulk in to fill the void. As a believer, you, no doubt have also been stunned by foreign things that have replaced holy practices. We must resist this unfortunate trend. For this reason, I am humbly asking for your assistance as I have also asked the assistance of our clergy. I ask that you read with an open mind and heart the letter which I have addressed to our shepherds.

It is my intention to bolster and to restore the Catholic practice of the funeral Mass celebrated in the parish church. I know that there might be legitimate exceptions for funeral Masses celebrated in funeral home chapels but it is my intention that these exceptions become few and motivated by true necessity, and not by mere convenience. I have tried to the best of my ability to explain the Church's practice and discipline. I can only ask that you help us as best you can to ease the path for funeral Mass to be celebrated in the house of God, the parish church. For our part, I will insist that pastors and the parish staff offer welcome, availability, and timely avenues of communication with families and with you.

I thank God for you who, though you are exposed to death every day, are still sensitive to families who have suffered loss and who seek the consolation which only faith in the resurrection may bring. Know of my fondest prayers and best wishes for you and your families.

With every good wish, I am

Faithfully yours in Christ,

Most Reverend J. Douglas Deshotel, D.D.
Bishop of Lafayette

JDD:mhb

enclosure