

Catholic Death Care and Funeral Guidebook

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Catholic Death Care Guidebook Overview

As in the case of all religions and belief systems, death holds a great deal of significance in Catholicism and is practiced diversely in the United States. Ways to care for and honor the dead depend on family traditions, individual religious beliefs, and situational circumstances. It is important that those who are practicing Catholic death care feel empowered to hold a funeral that reflects the wishes of the deceased and the family. Death care is very personal within Catholicism, and the diversity of the traditions are apparent in community death practices. It can be helpful to consult a local priest or deacon who can connect those close to death and their families to resources for Catholics experiencing loss. A religious professional or funeral director can also help the family determine what kinds of personal elements they would like to include or not include in a funeral.

This guide is intended to be an overview of potential options and resources to help Catholics prepare for death, care for the body, plan a funeral, and process their grief and mourning. It is not comprehensive and is not intended to be followed exactly. Please feel free to take any parts that feel meaningful and helpful and leave behind those that do not serve you. The process of death can be an overwhelming and difficult time, and this guide is one resource intended to help people navigate it.

For more information on how to hold an independent or home funeral, please visit the Home Funeral Alliance at [Home Funeral Alliance](#).

Catholicism and Beliefs Surrounding Death

Catholics believe that death is not the end of existence, but is rather a transition in which the eternal soul goes to be reunited with God. After death, it is believed that the soul is judged immediately. If the soul is clean of sin, it will be sent on to pass through the gates of heaven. The belief in Jesus is a critical aspect of Catholicism which separates it from other Abrahamic religions like Judaism. The core of their belief lies in accepting Jesus as their savior and acknowledging that he died for their sins, allowing humans to be redeemed in the sight of God. Because of this belief, it is important that Catholics are baptized after they are born, and confirmed later in life. Catholics hope that after death, their soul will go to heaven to dwell in their eternal home with God. The acceptance of Jesus as one's savior is necessary in order to enter the celestial kingdom of God. Catholics believe that in heaven, there is no suffering or pain, and that they will be reunited with their loved ones who have also passed on. This can be achieved by living life on earth as a good Catholic and honoring certain traditions that are believed to assure a peaceful afterlife. Specific rituals like baptism, confirmation, confession, communion, marriage, and funeral rites are all meant to encourage a person to live a more Christian life which will help them to secure a spot in heaven.

Another important part of Catholic theology around death is the belief in resurrection. According to the Christian text the Book of Revelation, a day of judgement will come, when all the souls who have died will be resurrected. The souls will be reunited with their early bodies, deeming it important for physical remains to be preserved through burial. They will be judged based on their lives and how well they upheld Christian values. God will then determine whether or not they will go on to enjoy an eternal afterlife in his kingdom. Because of this, Catholics feel strongly about how the body should be cared for leading up to, and after death.

Resources For Catholic Theology on Death:

- [What Happens to Our Bodies Immediately after We Die? | Catholic Answers Q&A](#)
- [What the Church Says About Death | Catholic Teaching | Art of Dying Well](#)
- [Where Do Christians Go When They Die? | Desiring God](#)
- [What Happens When You Die? | Cru](#)

Preparing For Death

The rituals that take place before the death of a Catholic are determined by the sacred rituals of the Catholic church. The priest or deacon of the dying person's local church should be contacted, as they will be able to help the dying and their family determine what kinds of traditions they would like to honor. A priest or deacon will also be able to facilitate any last rites that might be appropriate. When it becomes obvious that a loved one is getting close to the end of their life, the family may wish to reach out to the local parish to share the somber news. The parish will usually publish the information in the weekly bulletin or make an announcement at Sunday service so that the congregation is able to pray for them and their family.

A general tradition that is observed by Catholics and Christians alike, comforts the dying by reciting prayers at the bedside, anointing the person, and performing a communion. Catholics have a special ritual called the "last rites" or "sacrament of reconciliation" that is done by a Catholic priest at the end of life. This blessing provides ultimate forgiveness and absolution to the dying person for any sins they have committed during their life. It is a kind of confession that concludes with the priest asking God to let the person into his eternal kingdom of heaven. The local parish priest will be available to come to wherever the dying person is to perform these rituals. They may continue to help the dying participate in communion as long as the person is able to swallow. The final communion is called the viaticum which affirms the person's commitment to their faith and God, as well as provides the dying with sustenance as they begin their journey to the afterlife.

There are many prayers and hymns which center death and may bring comfort to the dying. Reading the Holy Bible and reflecting on specific passages on death, suffering, and the promise of an afterlife are also ways that families may choose to care for their dying. There are also many hymns that are traditionally sung throughout the experience of death, that are intended to bring those who are struggling some comfort.

Sometimes, a person will have specific wishes about how they want their funeral to be conducted. When they are nearing the end of their lives, it can be a good time to ask them about if they want any particular songs played or hymns

sung, what they would like to be done with their body, and if they have any other special requests.

Gathering close family and loved ones is a good way to support Catholics who are facing death. A person who is dying may wish to express regrets, important memories, fears, hopes, and gratitude when reflecting on their life and on death. It may be helpful to encourage them to focus on their relationship with God and Jesus and to reflect on their personal spirituality. The local priest may be helpful in guiding a person through their emotional journey as they get closer to death. Providing a listening ear and maintaining empathy are often the most meaningful ways to comfort someone facing death.

Resources on How to Prepare for the Death of a Catholic and Provide Spiritual Comfort:

- [Doula's Guide to Catholic Rituals at End of Life](#)
- [CATHOLIC ENCYCLOPEDIA: Preparation for Death](#)
- [A good Catholic death](#)
- [Christianity & End-of-Life Care](#)
- [Living like We're Dying: How Christians Can Prepare for Death | Elizabeth Turnage](#)

Caring for the Body

Following the Death

After the moment of death, a close family member may close the eyes and mouth of the deceased. Loved ones may want to sit with the body to say prayers, final goodbyes, and to grieve their passing. If the priest is present, they may give the person a special blessing upon death.

If the body is to be transported to a funeral home, the funeral director can be contacted so that they can arrange for transport of the body. Once the body is transported to the funeral home, they will usually assume full responsibility over the body, and will prepare it before the funeral.

Some families may prefer to care for the body themselves and keep it in a family home until the funeral. Although still a smaller trend within Catholic communities, this is becoming an increasingly normalized practice and actually dates back to ancient Christian methods of caring for the dead. In the ancient Mediterranean, the family of the deceased would care for the body as a final act of love and kindness. It is also believed that caring for loved ones who have died helps those who are living to process and mourn the loss. If the family wishes to care for the body independently, they may want to make a transport plan ahead of time. For more information about how to care for the body in a private residence consult the Home Funeral Alliance Guidebook which can be accessed at [Home Funeral Alliance](#).

Burials, Cremations, and Other Options

Historically, Christians have chosen to bury their dead rather than cremate them. This is due to the belief in resurrection which requires the existence of physical remains in order for it to take place. While there are many existing Catholic cemeteries, it is not necessary for the burial site to be one. Through a process called interment, a priest can bless any ground in which the body is to be buried. It is important however, that a Catholic chooses a cemetery that offers burial plots which are permanent, rather than successive (reused every 50-60 years after the body has had time to fully decompose). The grave should be clearly marked with the name of the deceased person, so that family and friends may visit the gravesite to pray for them.

Because Christian funerals sometimes don't happen immediately following the death, if the deceased is going to be buried, they are usually embalmed. Embalming is done at a funeral home. Embalming also allows the family and funeral guests to have a viewing of the body if they choose.

While there is a strong preference for burial in the Catholic church, cremation is also an acceptable option. The cremated remains are still expected to be buried so that the family has a physical place to come pray for their deceased loved ones.

Environmentally Friendly Funeral Practices, Green Burials, and Donation

If Catholics are interested in burial practices that are more environmentally friendly, green or natural burials might be a good option. Many Christians believe that having a natural burial, which allows for the body to naturally decompose and be returned to the earth, is a more Christ-like option, allowing people to enact stewardship over the land. The body should still be placed in a wooden casket as opposed to a shroud which will eventually decompose. While the body cannot be embalmed for natural burials, there are many ways the body can be preserved until after the funeral. For more information on how to hold Catholic funerals that are environmentally friendly, consult the resources below on “green burials”. Combining green burial practices with the beliefs held by Catholics can be a meaningful way to honor a person who was fond of the environment and nature. Catholicism also supports the decision to donate the body to science if it is the wish of the deceased.

Resources on Body Care and Burial Practices:

- [Have Christians forgotten how to care for the dead? - U.S. Catholic](#)
- [A Practical Guide to Death for Catholics | Franciscan Media](#)
- [How Should Christians Bury Their Dead?](#)
- [Should Christians Cremate Their Loved Ones? | Desiring God](#)
- Green Burials
 - [Green burial as an act of faith | The Christian Century](#)
 - [Comparing Natural Burial Traditions Across Different Religions - Serenity Ridge](#)
 - [The church forbids 'human composting' at death. But what about 'green' burials? - America Magazine](#)
 - [Plan a Green Burial | Step-by-Step Eco Funeral Planning](#)

Catholic Funerals

Funeral Arrangements and Attire

Catholic funerals tend to be fairly formal and run according to official church proceedings. Specific elements of the funeral may depend on the wishes of the deceased, the preference of the family, and the individual circumstances of the situation. Funerals can be held at a church, family home, somewhere in nature, at a funeral home, or graveside. Choosing to have a funeral in a family home honors the ancient tradition of how historic Christians have honored their dead. Finding a funeral home that honors the family's wishes to care for their own dead while providing logistical support around cremation, burials, and transport can be helpful.

Some families might hold a pre-funeral vigil to provide an opportunity for close family and friends to spend time together and grieve the loss before the funeral. They may read poems, share stories, and sing songs. If there is a body viewing, it often happens during this vigil and may be reserved for those who were closest to the deceased.

The funeral serves the purpose of guiding the soul of the deceased to heaven and to provide support for the family. Rituals and funeral practices usually center around faith in God and remembrance of the person's life. Pallbearers, who are usually close friends and family of the deceased, will bring the casket into the church. They will be greeted by the priest who will sprinkle holy water on the casket and bless the deceased as they enter. A table of remembrance might be put up near the casket with a photo of the deceased and other tokens of remembrance.

The funeral service will be led by the priest or deacon of the church. Usually the service will include hymns, prayers, and music. The mourners will collectively pray for the deceased and send blessings that God has mercy on their soul. After the liturgy of the word (a reading of the Old Testament, Psalms, the New Testament, and the Gospels), the priest will give a homily which reflects on the meaning of those readings in relation to the person who has died. Then, the mourners will partake in Communion, or Liturgy of the Eucharist. Following the Holy Communion, families will read any eulogies they prepared, and the priest will give a final commendation before the burial.

Unless the family states otherwise, guests can expect to dress modestly in dark colors like black, navy, and dark blue. Most families accept and appreciate flowers being sent to honor the dead, and will display them at the funeral service. Other gestures such as cards and donations to charities are thoughtful as well.

Burial Proceedings

After the funeral, the body will be transported to the chosen site and the rest of the congregation will gather there. At a cemetery or burial ground, the priest or deacon may lead another series of prayers or say some final words in remembrance of the person. They will perform what is called the “rite of committal” which is a final religious offering of peace, comfort, and hope and a promise of eternal life. The blessing will help the soul transition to be with God, and asks that any sins be forgiven. Usually, some holy water is sprinkled on the casket. Immediate family and close friends might share eulogies, stories, and expressions of grief to the congregation. Then, the body is lowered into the grave in a casket or coffin unless it is a green burial. Some mourners might wish to sprinkle some soil into the grave as a final goodbye.

Alternative Options Post-Funeral

If the body is being cremated, it will be transferred to the crematorium after the funeral. The ashes will be returned to the family who will then bury them in a designated place.

Resources on Catholic Funerals:

- [What Happens at a Catholic Funeral? Complete Guide | Art of Dying Well](#)
- [Christianity & End-of-Life Care](#)
- [What are Christian funeral rites](#)
- [Have Christians forgotten how to care for the dead? - U.S. Catholic](#)
- [RITE OF COMMITTAL \(Graveside\)](#)
- [Christian Funeral Hymns](#)

Catholic Mourning Period and Grief

The way Catholic families and communities chose to grieve is extremely personal and should be tailored to best serve their individual needs. Some may want to be surrounded by family and loved ones while others might prefer space for private prayer and spiritual reflection. While there is no right or wrong way for Catholics to mourn their dead, the religion has some traditions that are intended to support the mourners in their time of grief.

The typical mourning period for Catholics is a period of thirty days following the death of a person. Close family members may observe certain mourning rituals for up to a year. Regularly attending Mass and connecting with other Catholic community members are often important aspects of the period of grief.

After the funeral ends, some mourners might want to hold a reception or wake to continue grieving in community by gathering in a private residence or home. There, they may read scripture together, pray, and share memories of the deceased. There will often be food and drink at the gathering. The community usually supports the immediate family in mourning by cooking meals or bringing food, helping with childcare, performing daily tasks like cleaning, and offering to listen and be a source of comfort.

Catholics grieve the loss of a loved one, but often find comfort in the hope that they are with God. Although their physical body is no longer on Earth, they believe that their soul lives on and is often present with their living family members. It is okay during the mourning process to feel both sorrow and hope. Expressing difficult feelings are helpful in processing the complexity of losing a loved one.

To express condolences for the family, phone calls, visits, flowers, food, and cards are appropriate. Empathic gestures, small acts of kindness, and a willingness to listen are all ways in which people can express support for a grieving family.

Resources on Catholic Grieving and Mourning:

- [Catholicism: Periods of Mourning](#)
- [Here is a Catholic Guide to Understanding Grief](#)
- [How to Grieve as a Christian](#)
- [Learning How to Grieve | The Village Church](#)
- [How do I grieve as a Christian? - TheCatholicSpirit.com](#)

Complete List of Online Resources

National Home Funeral Alliance

- <https://www.homefuneralalliance.org/>
- State Laws:
 - <https://www.homefuneralalliance.org/state-laws>

Resources For Catholic Theology on Death:

- [What Happens to Our Bodies Immediately after We Die? | Catholic Answers Q&A](#)
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