

# What every Catholic needs to know about preparing for death

That's a stark question, one that sounds especially harsh to ears accustomed instead to our society's message of relentless pursuit of immortality and eternal youth.

And yet, as the old saying goes, death is one of the few certain things about this life. There's absolutely no avoiding it.

Of course, it would be morbid to obsess over the inevitability of our own deaths to the point of being unable to live peacefully, happily and fruitfully. But some of the Church's greatest spiritual teachers point out that the fullest and most holy lives are those lived with a regular acknowledgement that our time on earth is limited and each moment we have is precious.

The 16th-century "apostle of Rome," St. Philip Neri, pointed out (in a phrasing that has been borrowed many times by inspirational publishers): "The best way to prepare for death is to spend every day of life as though it were your last."

And Thomas á Kempis, 15th-century author of "The Imitation of Christ," one of the best-known Catholic books of spirituality, noted: "Happy is the man who keeps the hour of death always in mind, and daily prepares for it."

Preparing for death means, most importantly, making sure that we reconcile with God and live in a state of grace. But our preparations should not stop there. How about reconciling with estranged family members or others? Offering or seeking forgiveness?

There are practical considerations as well, which are detailed in the next few pages and deserve the attention of every adult Catholic, no matter how seemingly far from death.

Taking action on these items will boost, at a minimum, the peacefulness of your passing. But it might even help bring others closer to Christ – and that surely won't be a bad thing to have happen when you're standing before the Throne of Judgment.

## **The last things**

Christian doctrine concerning the last things of death, judgment, heaven and hell – known as eschatology – refers to a final period of world history when God's majestic plan of salvation is realized as all creation is finally recognized to him, reaching the beginning of its fullest possible realization.

**Death:** The end of personal existence and the beginning of eternity, when the body and soul are separated.

**Judgment:** At particular judgment, the soul will be condemned to hell, be rewarded with the blessings of heaven or given time in purgatory to be purified before entering heaven. At general judgment, Christ will judge all according to their holiness, faith and love for him, and their charity toward others.

**Heaven:** The state of those who, having attained salvation, are in glory with God and enjoy the beatific vision.

**Hell:** The place, state or condition prepared for Satan and the unrepentant, where the pain of loss of vision of God is felt for all of eternity.

Sources: Catholic Encyclopedia and Catholic Dictionary

## **Last rites and anointing**

What does it mean when we say someone received “last rites”? Is that the same thing as anointing of the sick? Here are some definitions to clear up confusion.

The Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick, formerly known as extreme unction, is now administered to anyone with serious or chronic illness, not just to those who are near death. It can only be administered by a priest or deacon. As the Catechism of the Church explains: “The proper effects of the sacrament include a special grace of healing and comfort to the Christian who is suffering the infirmities of serious illness or old age, and the forgiving of the person’s sins” (glossary).

Last rites refers to the sacramental rites and prayers used in the pastoral care of someone who is dying, including anointing of the sick, penance and Communion (known as viaticum, or prayers for a journey, when administered to the dying). If a priest is unavailable, a layperson may administer the prayers in an emergency situation.

To schedule either, call your parish or hospital chaplaincy.

## **Planning a funeral Mass**

If you were to die suddenly in a car accident or become incapacitated, would family and friends know your wishes to have a Catholic funeral? Those are a couple of the many reasons why you should make your wishes known among family and at the funeral home of your choice and your parish.

Here is a sample of the information you should consider when planning your funeral Mass, adapted from the Diocese of Memphis’ “Planning Your Catholic Funeral” guide.

Similar planning should be done for the vigil and the rite of committal used at the graveside, along with other related

rites and prayers.

- Place (your parish church):
- Celebrant:
- Concelebrating Priest/s (other priests you would like to invite to celebrate the Funeral Mass):
- Music preferences (instrument, choir, cantor, specific hymns – again, discuss with parish representative):
- Servers (names and contact information):
- If you would like family members or friends to place the pall on the coffin, indicate their names and contact information here:
- Pallbearers – the usual number is six, there can be four or eight:
- Readings from Scripture – Family members or friends may serve as lectors.

Old Testament:

Psalm:

New Testament:

Gospel:

Lectors (please include contact information):

Old Testament reading:

New Testament reading:

- Homily Notes for the Priest (Is there anything you would like the priest to mention during his homily pertaining to your life in Christ?):
- Gift Bearers (two or more, these ministers should be Catholic):
- Extraordinary Ministers of Holy Communion (names and contact information):
- Following the prayer after Communion, if a family member or friend of the family wishes to speak words of

remembrance of the deceased, the funeral rite indicates this should be done before the Final Commendation begins. Guidelines for such words are:

Clearly not a eulogy.

Very brief (Parish should suggest a definite length of time).

Be positive in nature.

Demonstrates how the faith life of the deceased was portrayed in their lived experience.

Speak to the Christlike attitudes/values that were important in their life.

A copy of the text is shared ahead of time with a member of the parish staff.

Do you wish to have someone speak? If so, indicate a name and contact information:

## **Funeral Mass symbolism**

**Pall:** This white cloak that is draped over the casket derives from the white garment a child or adult traditionally receives at baptism. It reminds us that death is the completion of baptism, when we are called to be finally conformed to Christ.

**Easter candle:** Another reminder of baptism, it represents Christ, the Light of the World and is placed at the head of the coffin during the funeral.

**Holy water:** The sprinkling of holy water is a sign of farewell. It, too, represents our baptism and acknowledges the unity of all who are baptized in the Body of Christ.

**Incense:** It reminds people present at the funeral that they can pray for the deceased, and that those prayers rise to the throne of God.

## **Cremation guidelines**

With the high costs of funerals and burial these days, many people, including Catholics, are opting for cremation. The National Funeral Directors' Association projects that by 2025, more than half of Americans will be cremated (up from 30 percent in 2005).

Even though the Catholic Church has permitted the practice since 1963 – as long as it isn't done in a way to diminish respect for the body or belief in its resurrection – burial is still preferred (see Canon 1176).

The Church has set forth guidelines for proper treatment of cremated remains. Cremation should take place after a funeral, allowing the body to be present at the funeral Mass. Remains must be buried or interred: "The cremated remains of a body should be treated with the same respect given to the human body from which they come. This includes the use of a worthy vessel to contain the ashes, the manner in which they are carried, the care and attention to proper placement and transport, and the final disposition. The cremated remains should be buried in a grave or entombed in a mausoleum or columbarium" (Order of Christian Funerals for the United States, No. 416).