

# THE CATHOLIC FUNERAL RITE

## Catholic Beliefs about Eternal Life: Fauré's Requiem

### Symbols on the coffin

The coffin is covered in a white cloth, called a 'pall'. This is a reminder of baptism when the newly baptised person is presented with a white garment as a symbol of being washed clean of the sin that separates humans from God. Also, because every coffin is covered in a pall, it is a reminder that all are equal in the eyes of God. So everyone is worthy of salvation through Christ.

The Book of the Gospels is sometimes placed on the coffin. This is to remind people that Christians live by the teachings Jesus gives and the example he sets in the Gospel and that by doing this they will have eternal life. A cross is often placed on the coffin. The baptism ceremony includes the priest or deacon making the sign of the cross on the person to mark their joining the Christian community. It is through Jesus' death on the cross and his resurrection that he defeated death and brought salvation for humans.

*'In baptism, (name) received the sign of the cross. May he/she now share in Christ's victory over death.'*

The Paschal candle is often placed beside the coffin as a symbol of belief in the Resurrection. Flowers may be placed on the coffin but in moderation, so that they do not hide these important symbols of faith and hope.

### Liturgical colour and final commendation

Priests wear white at Easter for a funeral, the liturgical colour of the Resurrection, and may wear white for the rest of the year, or purple, which is a sign of mourning. As with all the parts of the funeral, the purpose is to express Christian hope in the Easter story and faith that the deceased person will have eternal life with God after death, which is also expressed in the prayers of the Final Commendation:

*'May the angels lead you into paradise: may the martyrs come to welcome you and take you to the holy city, the new and eternal Jerusalem.'*



The coffin is incensed which means the priest walks around the coffin with incense to honour the dead person.



The pall placed over the coffin symbolises the white robes the priest wears at baptisms and also that everyone is equal in the eyes of God.

A variety of symbols and actions are used during a Catholic funeral to remind the family and friends of the deceased person of their faith in the Resurrection. The purpose is to allow the family to grieve for the dead person, to celebrate the love they have for them and to find comfort in the hope that they have gone on to eternal life with God.



### Symbolic actions

At the beginning and end of the funeral the coffin is sprinkled with holy water. The coffin is also sprinkled with holy water before being buried or cremated. Once again this is a reminder of the water used in baptisms and the gift of eternal life. The accompanying prayer is:

*'In the waters of baptism, (name) died with Christ and rose with him to new life. May he/she now share with him eternal glory.'*

At the end of the funeral the coffin is incensed as a sign of honouring the person, whose body was a temple of the Holy Spirit. The incense also symbolises the prayers of those gathered rising up to God.



Processions are a traditional way of acknowledging the importance of the occasion. It is common for the coffin to be carried out of the church in a solemn procession. It brings the community together to show the grieving relatives and friends that everyone present is in solidarity with them.

### Sources of Wisdom and Authority

Key quotations have been highlighted.

## Summary

- Requiem uses serene, calm melodies to convey beliefs about death and eternal life, for example, that the Resurrection gives hope and that death is not to be feared. Instruments such as harp and violin and soprano voices give the composition a sense of the 'heavenly'.
- A Catholic funeral uses symbols, prayers and readings to convey beliefs about eternal life.

Many classical composers have used Christian liturgy as a source of inspiration for their work. There are several well-known versions of music composed for funerals. These are known by the term 'requiem', which is from the Latin for 'rest'.

Gabriel Fauré (1845–1924) composed a requiem that is full of beautiful melodies. Written just after the death of his father and first performed just before the death of his mother, the requiem brings a sense of calm and peace. *In the requiem he wanted to show that you could be sad about the death of loved ones while also hoping that after death they had gone on to eternal life with God.* Fauré said that he did not want to express a fear of death. Instead the requiem focuses on the hope that the dead will be in heaven and he expresses this in the music using harps, violins and the sound of angelic sopranos.

*'It has been said that my Requiem does not express the fear of death and someone has called it a lullaby of death.*

*But it is thus that I see death: as a happy deliverance, an aspiration towards happiness above, rather than as a painful experience.'* Gabriel Fauré.

The Final Commendation is the part of the funeral where the mourners say their final goodbye to the dead person.

The *In Paradisum* is a prayer that is sometimes used in the Final Commendation. It asks for the deceased to be welcomed into paradise. Fauré's music for *In Paradisum* reflects this hope. The gentleness of the music reflects the tranquility of life's trials being left behind and the music rises and soars before fading. The music of this section of Fauré's requiem is lighter and more delicate than previous sections, and has a steady, rhythmic beat. The choir sings in a higher pitch, sounding like the angels in heaven. Like the symbols and symbolic actions in the funeral, Fauré's music helps the grieving to have faith, comfort and hope. It does not focus on sadness, but on the peaceful and fear-free nature of death. In contrast, Verdi's Requiem 'Dies Irae' ('Day of Wrath') has loud, violent music that changes rapidly and conveys restlessness. The singing sounds like wailing and it is very different to the sense of calm and tranquillity in Fauré's requiem. Fauré himself said: *'...my Requiem is dominated from beginning to end by a very human feeling of faith in eternal rest.'*

### Prayers and readings



The readings from Scripture will be chosen to remind those present of the promise of resurrection and eternal life. Those readings will be a source of comfort for those grieving and a declaration of hope.

The prayers throughout the funeral will refer to baptism, to Easter and the Resurrection, to Jesus' sacrifice on the cross and the fact that because of this, Christians can hope for eternal life after death.

The priest or deacon will use their homily (sermon) to explain the Christian belief that Jesus defeated death through his resurrection and that this means that Christians can hope to have an eternal life with God after death. This should bring further comfort to the family and friends. The prayers of intercession will include prayers for the dead, for the grieving family and friends and for the wider community.

Although not a requirement of the funeral rite, many funerals in Catholic churches would include the Liturgy of the Eucharist. This would be particularly appropriate if the deceased or members of the family regularly attended Mass. Some funerals include a short 'eulogy'. This is where a relative or friend speaks about the life of the deceased person and can be a celebration of their positive contribution to the lives of their family and friends.

## Knowledge Check

1. What is the name of the white cloth that covers the coffin?
2. What two things does the white cloth remind us of?
3. Why is the Book of the Gospels sometimes placed on the coffin?
4. When and why is the coffin sprinkled with holy water?
5. For what two reasons is the coffin incensed?
6. What is the Latin term for rest?
7. What did Gabriel Fauré want to show in his requiem?
8. What do the prayers throughout the funeral refer to?

## Choose a Task

1. Create a detailed mind-map (try to make this visual)
2. Create a multiple-choice quiz (aim for at least 10 questions)
3. Create a poster/leaflet

**CHALLENGE!**  
Turn over the mat and try to complete your task without looking at the information. Then refer back to the task mat to see what you have missed/could have included.

## Exam Question

- a) Describe how Fauré's requiem reflects Catholic belief in eternal life [5]
- b) Describe how the Catholic funeral rite reflects Catholic belief in life after death [5]