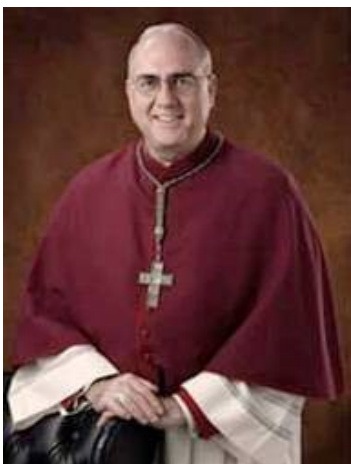


Preplanning Your Catholic Funeral Can Be A Final Expression Of Love

By Archbishop Joseph F. Naumann

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With the month of November beginning with the feasts of All Saints and All Souls, it is a time in the liturgical year when there is an intentional focus on remembering the dead in our prayers.

For the jubilee Year of Mercy, Pope Francis exhorted Catholics to strive to practice more faithfully the corporal and spiritual works of mercy. Among the corporal works in burying the dead and among the spiritual works is praying for the dead.

I have asked our priests during the month of November to preach about the importance of a proper Catholic burial. Sadly, in recent years, all too frequently lifelong, faithful Catholics are not receiving the benefit of a funeral Mass because their surviving relatives are not practicing the faith. It is important to specify in one's will and to communicate with loved ones your desire for a Catholic funeral liturgy and, if at all possible, burial in a Catholic cemetery.

Ironically, often non-Catholics, attending the funeral Mass of a friend, will express their appreciation for the beauty, the prayerfulness, the inspiration and the consolation they experienced from a Catholic funeral liturgy. Often, it is the funeral Mass that provides an opportunity to reawaken the desire and need for faith in non-practicing members of a family. Requesting a funeral Mass may be one of the greatest gifts you can give to your family and friends, as it may be the occasion that their hearts are opened to seek to come to know Jesus and draw closer to His Church.

The ground of the Catholic cemetery is consecrated and during the committal rites of each burial, there is a prayer offered for all those interred in the cemetery. At least annually in our Catholic cemeteries, a Mass is celebrated for all buried or entombed on this hallowed ground. The Catholic Church has been around for 2,000 years and will be present until Our Lord's second coming.

Thus, you can be confident that the burial places of your loved ones will be cared for with respect and reverence in future years. While there are many lovely private cemeteries, there is no way of knowing who will have responsibility for the management of these cemeteries in future years, decades and even centuries.

Sadly, funerals and burials can be extremely expensive. However, they need not be so. One can have a beautiful and reverent Catholic funeral and burial at a relatively low cost. Ornate caskets and elaborate floral arrangements are not necessary. Preplanning funerals is wise and financially prudent. With preplanning, costs can be anticipated and controlled. Decisions are not being made at the very emotional time of the death of a loved one. Prearranging your funeral can be a real gift to your children and family by reducing the decisions they have to make and giving them the consolation that they are fulfilling your desires.

In an effort to control costs, an increasing number of people are choosing cremation. While the church permits cremation, it is not the preferred choice. The following are quotes from the instruction in the Catholic Burial Ritual explaining why the Church favors burial of the body over cremation:

“The Christian faithful are unequivocally confronted by the mystery of life and death when they are faced with the presence of the body of one who has died. Moreover, the body which lies in death naturally recalls the personal story of faith, the loving family bonds, the friendships, and the words and acts of kindness of the deceased person. Indeed, the human body is inextricably associated with the human person, which acts and is experienced by others through that body. It is the body whose hands clothed the poor and embraced the sorrowing (411).

The body of a deceased Catholic Christian is also the body once washed in baptism, anointed with the oil of salvation, and fed with the Bread of Life. Thus, the Church’s reverence for the sacredness of the human body grows out of a reverence and concern both natural and supernatural for the human person. The body of the deceased brings forcefully to mind the Church’s conviction that the human body is in Christ a temple of the Holy Spirit and is destined for future glory at the resurrection of the dead. This conviction in faith finds its expression in a sustained and insistent prayer that commends the deceased person to God’s merciful care so that his or her place in the communion of the just may be assured. A further expression is the care traditionally taken to prepare the bodies of the deceased for a burial that befits their dignity, in expectation of the final resurrection in the Lord (412).

Although cremation is now permitted by the Church, it does not enjoy the same value as burial of the body. The Church clearly prefers and urges that the body of the deceased be present for the funeral rites, since the presence of the human body better expresses the values which the Church affirms in those rites (413).

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 the appropriate placement and transport, and the final disposition. The cremated remains should be buried in a grave or entombed in a mausoleum or columbarium. The practice of scattering cremated remains on the sea, from the air, or on the ground, or keeping cremated remains in the home of a relative or friend of the deceased are not the reverent disposition that the Church requires. Whenever possible, appropriate means for recording with dignity the memory of the deceased should be adopted, such as a plaque or stone which records the name of the deceased” (417).

As believers in the risen Jesus, we need not fear death. In fact, we believe death is the doorway to the heavenly kingdom. We should remind ourselves every day of the reality of death and that this world is not our final destination. Christian wisdom calls us not to be attached to this passing world, but to have our sights set on our eternal destiny.

It is not morbid to prepare for our funeral. In fact, it can be a last expression of love and consideration for our loved ones. Similarly, providing our loved ones with a Catholic funeral liturgy and attending to all the details of a proper Christian burial is indeed a great act of love and mercy.