



Funeral Traditions



Originally the **pall** was the pallium or cloak with which the corpse was covered on its way to burial. When the use of coffins became general the pall ceased to be necessary for the original purpose, and it was then used for draping the coffin. This was probably an excuse to retain the services of the pall-bearer, for pall-bearing had come to be looked upon as a duty of honour and a mark of rank and esteem.

In earlier times the pall, and sometimes the bier, was carried by those of the same rank as the deceased, as at Wellington's funeral, when the pall was borne by officers who had shared the hardships of many campaigns by his side. In the case of a man who was of no particular estate, if married the bearers would be his married friends, or if single his bachelor friends performed the task; nor was the matter always left to any chance arrangement, for a dying person frequently decided who should officiate at his funeral—who should carry his bier, pall and torches.

In the case of Royalty the pall is generally supported by princes or the nobility.

In Scotland the pall was called a "mort-cloth," and in the year 1598 it was decreed at the Kirk Session of Glasgow, that a "black cloth was to be laid on the corpse of the poor," a custom continued for two hundred years after, the "mort-cloth" being taken to the house where the body awaited burial and laid over it. The general assembly of Scotland decreed in the year 1563 "that a bier should be made in every country parish to carry the dead corpse of the poor to the burial place, and that those of the villages or houses next adjacent to the house where the dead corpse lieth, or a certain number out of every house shall convey the dead corpse to the burial place and bury it six feet under the earth."

Baptismal Symbols and Funerals

When the body of the deceased arrives at the door of the church for the Catholic funeral rites, the priest sprinkles the casket with holy water. If the body has been cremated, the remains are sprinkled. The water may be taken from a container of blessed water or directly from the baptismal font if it is located by the door.



For Catholics accustomed to signing themselves with holy water every time they enter the church, sprinkling the body seems perfectly natural. To others, it may

seem strange. We use holy water to remind us of our baptism. We enter the building with this simple reminder of the sacrament which gave us new birth. As the deceased enters the church for the final time, we sprinkle this faithful member of the community with holy water for the same reason. At death, this gesture seems even more significant. After all, baptism begins our life in Christ. Our death brings our earthly life in Christ to its completion.

Sprinkling the casket takes place whenever the body arrives at the church. If the vigil for the deceased has taken place in the church the night before the funeral, the reception of the body with sprinkling takes place then. If the vigil was at another location, the sprinkling takes place at the beginning of the funeral Mass.

Why don't we do the sprinkling and other rites at the entrance to the church or in the foyer?

After the sprinkling, a large white cloth, the pall, may be placed over the coffin. The pall has two meanings, both deriving from the New Testament. First, **the pall recalls the baptismal garment**. At baptism we are robed in a white garment as a sign of Christian dignity and instructed to bring that dignity unstained into the everlasting life of heaven. The garment recalls Revelation 3: 4-5, which announces that those who have not fallen to sin, who have not “soiled their garments”, will walk in white in glory. The names of those clothed in white, the passage continues, will never be erased from the book of the living. The funeral pall, then, reclothes the body in baptismal white to remind us of our hope in the resurrection.

Second, **the pall signifies equality**. The letter of James (2: 1-9) discourages favoritism. It challenges people who form judgments based on how someone is dressed. **The funeral pall clothes every deceased Christian in the same garment so that we appear as equals before our all-knowing maker and judge.**

The pall may be placed on the coffin by family, friends, or the priest. Sometimes the employees of the funeral company place the pall. Their assistance may simplify the proceedings, but it robs the family of a final tender gesture – clothing their loved one in the garment they will wear before the throne of God.

The sprinkling and the pall are two of many symbols in the funeral liturgies which recall baptism. They remind us of the gift of faith received by the faithful departed, their life in Christ and their hope of resurrection.



The Vigil

The Vigil may be celebrated in the funeral home as part of remembering the loved one. Some cultures celebrate the Vigil in the home of the deceased.

Usually the visitation time before the Vigil is the first opportunity the community at large has to come and offer condolences, lend support, and share in telling the stories of the life events of the one who has died. Such remembering is an important part of the grieving process. The Vigil is a time set aside during the visitation or reviewal for prayer together as a community to support the bereaved through ritual and prayer.

The **Word of God is the central prayer of the Vigil**. The format of the Vigil is usually Scripture readings, intercessions, the Our Father, and concluding prayers and blessings. Depending on where and when the Vigil occurs, adaptations to this basic format are made. The Vigil is usually led by a member of the Adult Care Ministry Team. The Vigil is also the time for sharing stories, for sharing poems, songs or other remembrances that family or friends have written.



The Funeral Service

The funeral service is a parish community's celebration of remembrance for the loved one who has died. The parish community gathers with the family and friends of the deceased to take heart from Scripture, to give thanks and praise to God for Christ's victory over sin and death, and to be nourished by Presence of God as the community of faith gathers.

A funeral differs from a memorial service, in that the body of the loved one is present. The symbols and symbolic actions of the funeral service are:

- The procession of the body into the Church—calls to mind the nobility of life and the connection to those others in which they shared life.
- The candle—sign of Christ's presence and his victory over sin and death.
- The sprinkling with holy water—reminds us of the waters of baptism.
- The funeral pall—draping the white cloth over the casket connects symbolically to the person's baptism, and is a strong sign of the equality of all people before the Lord.
- The presence of the Christian community—by their prayer and song they bring support and consolation and give witness to our hope in the resurrection.

- Words of Remembrance—this is optional; it is a time for a family member or friend to give witness to the Christian life that the deceased had lived through a prepared word of remembrance.
- The proclamation of the Word of God—reveals God’s loving presence; the Word gives strength, provides consolation and hope in the resurrection.

When the deceased has not been baptized or has been cremated, the pall is not used.

During a funeral, a national flag should not be placed on the coffin instead place of the pall. For a veteran, a flag may be used to drape the casket during the Vigil Service or draped in part on top of the pall.

At the close of the funeral service, the pall is removed from the casket. The pastor then escorts the casket out of the church, followed by the family.



Rite of Committal

The Rite of Committal is the final act of the community in caring for the body of its deceased member. This prayer is all about bringing the earthly remains of our loved one to his/her final place of rest. This rite may be celebrated at the grave, tomb, or crematorium, or in the church itself before the coffin processes out.

The Rite of Committal is composed of Scripture, a prayer over the place of committal, the Lord’s Prayer, concluding prayer and a prayer over the people. Songs and other elements may be incorporated, weather and time permitting.

A gesture or sign of leave-taking—often the sprinkling with holy water, placing roses or dirt on the grave—concludes the rite. This final time of prayer is important and needs to be celebrated so that we may have the courage and energy to say our final good-byes to the bodily presence of our loved ones, believing that their spiritual presence is now a part of the greater communion of saints that await us in our heavenly home.



I believe in the communion of saints.