

MUSIC FOR FUNERAL RITES
(from the *Advisory Committee on Church Music* of the
Irish Episcopal Commission for Liturgy)

The following advice is offered to help you in making arrangements for music to accompany the Funeral Rites of your loved one. The Order of Christian Funerals (the book we have been using at funerals since Easter 1992) outlines the role of music at this difficult time:

The music at funerals should support, console, and uplift the participants and should help to create in them a spirit of hope in Christ's victory over death and in the Christian's share in that victory. This is the challenge which musicians, celebrants and you the bereaved face in preparing to celebrate with dignity the Funeral Rites of a Christian. There is considerable scope for music at the two services which take place in the church –the Reception of the Body at the Church and the Funeral Mass.

A. Rite of Reception

Since the church is the place where the community of faith assembles for worship, the rite of reception of the body at the church has great significance. Music is possible at the following points in this simple liturgy:

1. The Entrance Song accompanies the Procession from the door of the church and is complete when all are in place to continue with the liturgy. Participation in this may be helped by allowing, after the sprinkling of holy water, a large part of the congregation to get to their seats before the chief mourners, the coffin and the priest. If singing is not possible instrumental music is played (organ, harp, guitar, etc. depending on availability of musicians) which can continue during the placing of Christian symbols.
2. The Responsorial Psalm is sung after the First Reading and many settings of appropriate psalms are available. The psalm enables the community to respond in faith to the readings, to express its grief and to praise God. The psalms are rich in imagery, feeling and symbolism. They powerfully express the suffering and pain, the hope and trust of people in every age and culture. Above all the psalms sing of faith in God, of revelation and redemption. Since the psalms are songs, whenever possible, they should be sung.
3. The Litany or Prayer of Intercession is spoken or sung after the Homily. Lord, have mercy is the response in the litany. This will be enhanced if sung, using, for example, one of the Penitential Rite of Mass settings with which the congregation is familiar.

A hymn to Our Lady might be appropriate during the Concluding Rite according to local custom. The use of instrumental music as people offer their sympathies is always appreciated and contributes to the warmth of the service. The music at this celebration can be effectively led by a cantor or solo singer with the support of an instrumentalist. Your parish may have this kind of structure in place so that you can make choices from the available repertoire of the parish community without too much difficulty.

B. The Funeral Mass

The choice of music, either vocal or instrumental, at a funeral Mass follows the usual guidelines for any Eucharistic celebration.

Liturgy of the Word

The singing of the Responsorial Psalm is an important element on the celebration of the Liturgy of the Word. It is important not to substitute other songs in place of the psalm at this time in the liturgy. Some people feel that singing a Gospel Acclamation is out of keeping with the spirit of a funeral liturgy. On the contrary, the Alleluia is a powerful reminder of Easter joy in the resurrection which is the source of our hope at this time.

Eucharistic Prayer Acclamations

Given that the Eucharistic Prayer is the chief prayer of the Mass, it is important that everyone is encouraged to participate in the singing. Three acclamations are traditionally sung during this prayer: the Holy, Holy (Sanctus). The memorial acclamation (e.g. When we eat this bread) and the Great Amen. Choose a setting which is well known or which can be sung easily by everyone. It may be helpful to have a cantor or solo singer to lead the congregation.

Songs and Hymns

When choosing songs and hymns for the Funeral Mass, it is important that the congregation is able to participate as much as possible. The Entrance and Communion Songs are particularly significant. Since music can evoke strong feelings, it should be chosen with great sensitivity. If you are thinking of including a piece of non-religious music, it is important that it is in harmony with our faith in the Lord's death and resurrection and will contribute to the atmosphere of Christian worship. Secular music should not replace the sacred music which is part of the rite. Other songs are often suggested for a Funeral Mass which would be more suited to the wake in the home when favourite songs can be sung in the right setting. Once again the Order of Christian Funerals, our funeral book, offers us advice in the matter of texts and choices: Music is integral to the funeral rites. It allows the community to express convictions and feelings that words alone may fail to convey. It has the power to console and uplift mourners and to strengthen the unity of the assembly in faith and love. The texts of the songs chosen for a particular celebration should express the paschal mystery of the Lord's suffering, death and triumph over death and should be related to the readings from Scripture.

C. Final Commendation and Farewell

The Song of Farewell is usually sung as the coffin is incensed and sprinkled with holy water at the end of Mass. The Order of Christian Funerals contains a straightforward music of the refrain and verses: Receive his/her soul and present him/her to God the Most High.

The Processional Song—May the angels lead you into Paradise— offers words of hope to everyone who gathers for the funeral. Some examples are given in the book we use and there are several popular settings of this song, including Songs of the Angels and other suitable pieces like An tAiséirí.

When Christians die, the Church intercedes on their behalf, confident that “life is changed, not ended.” The Church also ministers to the sorrowing and consoles them in the funeral rites with the comforting word of God and the sacrament of the Eucharist. During the funeral rites, the Church on earth unites with the Church in heaven to offer worship, praise and thanksgiving to God for the gift of a life which has now been returned to God, the author of life. The funeral rites also bring hope and consolation to the living.

We hope that this statement will help you as you grieve and that you will be assisted in your preparations by musicians who are committed to their role as ministers of consolation and hope.