

Symbols Used at the Funeral Liturgy

A Catholic funeral liturgy celebrates the life, death and resurrection of Christ and how, through Baptism, the deceased shares in the life of Christ. At a Catholic funeral liturgy many symbols are used to express the dignity of the deceased as a child of God.

The funeral liturgy begins with the reception of the body at the Baptismal Font, a reminder of the deceased's Baptism and initiation into the Body of Christ. Our font stands at the entrance to the worship space. Because the casket takes up most of the space on one side of the font, family and friends are encouraged to gather on all sides of the font for the reception of the body.

As the liturgy begins the Presider sprinkles the coffin with Holy Water as a remembrance that in the waters of baptism Christians receive the pledge of eternal life. Then the coffin is covered with a funeral pall, a cloth which drapes the casket during the liturgy. The pall symbolizes the white baptismal garment that the deceased received on the day of their Baptism when they, as St. Paul tells us, "put on Christ". The pall is a sign of the Christian dignity of the person and that all are equal in the eyes of God. Family members are invited to place the pall on the casket.

Draped with the pall, the coffin is now moved to the base of the sanctuary where the Paschal Candle stands. The Paschal Candle represents Christ, the Light of the World. The Paschal Candle reminds us of Jesus' victory over sin and death and of our participation in Christ's victory because of our Baptism. It reminds us, too, of our own Baptism when we received a Baptismal candle which was lit from the Paschal Candle and told that we have been enlightened by Christ and are to always walk as a child of the light.

The priest wears white vestments when celebrating a funeral liturgy because this color is associated with resurrection.

At some point during the funeral liturgy, usually at the end, the coffin or the cremated remains is incensed. Incense is used as a sign of honor to the body of the deceased, which through Baptism became a temple of the Holy Spirit. Incense is also used as a sign of the community's prayers for the deceased rising to the throne of God and as a sign of farewell.