

Pastoral Notes on the Celebration of Liturgical Rites for Mourning the Loss of an Unborn Child or Infant

Introduction: The loss of an infant prior to birth or shortly afterward is a very difficult experience for parents and their families. The pastoral care and concern shown by parish pastoral ministers and hospital staff is of great importance as we assist them in their time of grief and mourning. These notes address not only parents' grief, but also the pastoral care necessary for them to mourn outwardly their loss, including the celebration of liturgical rites. Sometimes, it is not clear to parishes, hospitals, and funeral homes what liturgical rites may be celebrated with families in this situation. These pastoral notes will assist pastors, deacons, and pastoral ministers as they provide pastoral care and comfort to these families.

1. Should we baptize infants who have died or are stillborn?

A living infant in **danger of death** is to be baptized without delay. When a priest or deacon is not available **anyone** may baptize with the consent of the parents. Catholic hospital personnel should be familiar with the rite found in Chapter V of the ritual *Baptism for Children*.

Particular care needs to be given when a child is stillborn or dies shortly after birth. Parents will ask, often with sad persistence, that a priest or deacon baptize the child. In their loving concern, the parent's underlying anxiety is really asking, "Is my unbaptized child with God?" Pastoral caregivers can confidently recall the words from the Catechism of the Catholic Church:

"As regards children who have died without Baptism, the Church can only entrust them to the mercy of God, as she does in her funeral rites for them. Indeed the great mercy of God who desires that all men should be saved and Jesus' tenderness toward children which caused him to say: 'Let them come to me, do not hinder them' allow us to hope that there is a way of salvation for children who have died without baptism." (CCC 1261)

Baptism is a sacrament for the living. But we need to seek and find other rites that express the comfort of faith when infants die before baptism.

2. What rites can be used with parents of deceased, stillborn or miscarried unbaptized infants?

Pastoral ministers will find many resources in the Order of Christian Funerals (OCF) Part II “Funeral Rites for Children.” Each prayer for a dead child also offers an alternative for a child who died before receiving baptism. Even if the child’s body is not present, the use of readings and prayer from the OCF can be very comforting to the family of a deceased infant.

Hospital chaplains and parish priests testify to the effectiveness of the use of the “Order for Blessing of Parents after a Miscarriage” in the case of stillborn or miscarried babies. If the body of the child is present, often the ceremonies of naming and signing the child from the Rite of Baptism can be consoling when celebrated together with this blessing. (Book of Blessings IX p. 86)

Effective pastoral presence and sympathetic words are at the heart of sound pastoral care. But we must recall that Catholics in grief seek and find in the Church’s liturgical rites an assurance of their child’s presence with God. Additionally, the Church’s liturgical rites allow for them to mourn and express outwardly their grief with a community of faith to surround them with their love and support. We owe it to them to respond as fully as possible.

3. How should parishes and hospital ministers respond when parents of stillborns or infants who died without baptism request funeral rites?

Odd as it may seem, we have found that this is a request not always understood or honored by priests and other pastoral ministers. As a general principle, the Church encourages funeral rites for unbaptized infants and stillborn babies.

In preparing funeral rites for situations such as these, we should keep in mind the following principles:

1. Part II of the OCF provides liturgical rites and texts for “Funeral Rites for Children” including the “Funeral Liturgy” with Mass in the presence of the body and “Funeral Liturgy outside of Mass” is also provided for in the OCF.
2. The OCF contains a section in Part I called “Related Rites and

Prayers.” Here are found brief prayers and rites to be used in a home, hospital, or funeral home with family and friends after the death of a loved one. Note the instructions of OCF # 234

“These rites as they are presented in Part I are models and should be adapted by the minister to the circumstances of the funeral liturgy for a child.” This adaptation, using Scripture and prayers from the funeral liturgy for children, is most important pastorally.

3. It is important to note the variety of prayers in “Funeral Rites for Children.” The rites and prayers for baptized children are distinct from those for children who died before baptism.
4. The OCF encourages the use of those rites that will best meet the needs of the family and community. “The minister, in consultation with those concerned, chooses those rites that best correspond to the particular needs and customs of the mourners. In some instances, for example, the death of an infant, only the rite of committal and perhaps one of the forms of prayer with the family may be desirable.” (OCF #235)
5. The public, communal character of these liturgical rites is best respected when family, friends, and hospital staff or members of the parish community are invited to participate. This is done with pastoral sensitivity to the parents and immediate family but also bearing in mind the great support that a prayerful community can offer.

The guidance offered here addresses a critical issue of pastoral care, namely, the variety of liturgical rites available when an infant dies. It is not then a question of simply tailoring the rites for children rather the larger issue is to select those rites and prayers which will meet the family’s needs.

4. Funeral directors sometimes discourage liturgical rites for infants and stillborns. How do we deal with this?

Parents who desire an element of a Catholic funeral liturgy for their child have a right to a positive response. In the case of reluctant funeral directors, the local pastor, should support the request of parents and family for a funeral liturgy.

5. Where should the rites be celebrated?

Some rites can be celebrated in the hospital or in the family home – e.g. “Prayers after Death,” “Gathering in the Presence of the Body,” “Order for Blessing of Parents after a Miscarriage.”

Other rites are better celebrated in a church, home or funeral home, e.g. the “Vigil for a Deceased Child” or the “Funeral Liturgy outside Mass” which includes the Final Commendation. The Funeral Mass is to be celebrated in a church or dedicated oratory or chapel.

The cemetery is the appropriate site for the Rite of Committal (with or without the Final Commendation). We should note the special rite for “Final Commendation for an Infant” (OCF # 337-342) as particularly suited to the committal of stillborns and infants who have died soon after birth.

6. In some cases the hospital will attend to the burial of a stillborn or an infant dying shortly after birth. What rites are suit able?

Where possible the “Rite of Final Commendation for an Infant” can be used (OCF # 337-342). It can be celebrated in the hospital with or without the presence of the child. Note that it is a model and may be adapted, e.g. with other readings from Scripture, or by asking the parents to name the child as part of the rite.

7. Is the celebration of Mass for these deceased children appropriate?

The Church offers the celebration of a Funeral Mass for baptized children but also for children who have died before baptism. In the case of unbaptized children certain ritual elements celebrating baptism, e.g. sprinkling with holy water, the use of the pall and incense are omitted. Special prayers are found in the ritual.

Where the Funeral Liturgy in the presence of the body is not possible, a Funeral Mass for deceased children is appropriate after burial.

Note that this is no longer called “Mass of the Angels”: but a “Funeral Liturgy” in the liturgical books.

8. A parish Liturgy for Deceased Children

Many parishes find an annual Mass scheduled for families who have

lost children during the past year is a powerful and consoling experience of worship. The Mass may be scheduled at any time, but the month of November is particularly fitting. Strive to make the Mass open to as wide a variety of needs as possible. Include families of miscarried or stillborn children and even families searching for spiritual healing after an abortion. (It seems more pastorally suitable that this liturgy would *not* be celebrated in conjunction with the All Souls Day parish liturgy.)

Parish bulletins could regularly carry an invitation to parents of stillborn children or miscarried babies to contact the pastor, deacon, or pastoral minister and arrange for the “Blessing of Parents After a Miscarriage.”

9. Liturgical Rites for Deceased Children and their families (see chart on page 7)

10. Pastoral Care of the Couple/Family in the Following Months

In the months following the loss of an infant or child, it is important to provide pastoral care for parents and families. A parish pastoral minister may simply stay in touch by making a quick phone call, or sending a note of care, or providing resources to support parents in their grief. There may be times when parents do not wish to be reminded of their loss, and in this case, pastoral care ministers follow the lead of the parents.

When the couple finds that they are pregnant again, this may be a good opportunity to celebrate the “Rite of Blessing of a Child within the Womb,” (available through the USCCB or Worship Office) or a blessing of parents found in the Book of Blessings.

11. Pastoral Care of women, men, and other family members who have lost a child through abortion

The Church invites women, men, and family members to healing and reconciliation after the loss of an unborn child through abortion. The words of Pope John Paul II may be a source of solace to mothers feeling guilty over their aborted baby’s eternal fate: “*You will*

come to understand that nothing is definitively lost and you will be able to ask forgiveness from your child who is now living with the Lord” (The Gospel of Life – 99). The Archdiocesan post-abortion ministry is Project Rachel, a ministry of the USCCB. This healing and reconciling program is offered through the Family and Respect Life Office. For more information, go to:

<http://www.catholiccincinnati.org/ministries-offices/family-life/respect-life/abortion/project-rachel/>.

Liturgical Rite	Minister	Notes
Order for Blessing of Parents after Miscarriage, <i>Book of Blessings</i> , p. 86	Priest, Deacon, Lay Minister	For use in hospital, home, or church
Prayers after Death, <i>Order of Christian Funerals</i> , (OCF) #101 - 108	Priest, Deacon, Lay Minister	To be adapted for children
Gathering in the Presence of the Body OCF, #109 - 118	Priest, Deacon or Lay Minister	To be adapted for children
Vigil for A Deceased Child, OCF, #243 - 263	Priest, Deacon or Lay Minister	Prayers and Scripture may be selected. For use in church, hospital, home, or funeral home.
Funeral Liturgy, OCF, #264-294	Priest	Prayers and Scriptures may be selected. For the unbaptized, the rites are adapted. See OCF rubrics.
Funeral Liturgy outside Mass OCF, #295 - 315	Priest or Deacon or Lay Minister in the absence of a Priest or Deacon	Prayers and Scripture may be selected. For the unbaptized, the rites are adapted. For use in church, funeral home, or hospital chapel.
Rite of Committal, OCF, #316 - 326	Priest, Deacon, or Lay Minister	At cemetery after Funeral Liturgy
Rite of Committal with Final Commendation, OCF, #327 - 336	Priest, Deacon, or Lay Minister	At cemetery when Funeral Liturgy has not been celebrated
Rite of Final Commendation for an Infant, OCF, #337 - 342	Priest, Deacon, or Lay Minister	For use at cemetery, in a home or hospital

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