

When to Contact the Parish about a Funeral

Someone you love is dying. Maybe it's even you.

If you would like to arrange a Catholic funeral, you may contact your local parish at any time. Each Catholic parish offers a ministry for the dead, and you will find someone there with experience to help you make your plans.

Which parish do you contact? Normally, you contact the parish closest to the residence of the one who is dying. All parishes have boundaries designating the foremost area in which its ministers offer pastoral care. Many people, however, choose to belong to a parish different from the one in whose boundaries they live. If Catholics register with a parish, they will have their names and contact information on record, and they will find a more ready welcome at times like this.

It is never too early to make this contact. Some people are under the mistaken impression that the time to contact a priest is when the person has reached the final day or two of life. In the past, a priest came to anoint a person near death in a sacrament called Extreme Unction, meaning last anointing. Many people still refer to it as "the last rites."

However, the anointing has migrated from its position at the end of life to a place earlier in one's illness. When an illness is grave, when a person has reached a certain age when they are more susceptible to illness, or when a person faces surgery, the time has probably arrived for a priest to offer the sacrament of the anointing of the sick.

The most important sacrament to give a person who is dying is communion under its special form, viaticum. The time to contact a priest, deacon, or communion minister is when the person is dying, but is still conscious enough to renew baptismal promises and can swallow. If a priest comes to administer viaticum, he adds the apostolic pardon, granting a plenary indulgence from the Apostolic See. This means that the person not only experiences

forgiveness of sins, but also cancellation of the punishments attached to them.

A priest may also hear the person's confession. If you would like this to happen, contact a priest when the person is still able to review life and express sorrow for sins.

A priest's ministry has the greatest impact when he can converse with the sick person and offer the sacraments of confession and the anointing of the sick. You help the priest most if you contact him while the sick person's condition still permits this ministry.

As death draws near to the one you love, a good priest would love to be present, but sometimes he cannot, due to other responsibilities. Any other minister—a deacon, a communion minister, or some other parish leader—may be able to come and lead the prayers for the dying. Or the prayers for the dead.

After death has occurred, in some parishes the priest handles all the local funeral arrangements. In other parishes, someone else may be assigned to the task. Whoever answers the phone at the parish office will know. Or you may review the parish website for pertinent information.

The death of a Catholic creates a void in the lives of family and friends. The local Catholic parish will want to help you through the time of grief and into a period of hope.