

Guidance for Funerals

Introduction

At the time of writing, the public celebration of Mass remains prohibited under measures to suppress spread of COVID-19; this is stated explicitly in Government guidance as it is an act of corporate worship. Churches are re-opening for individual prayer from 15th June and Guidance from the Government has been published to ensure this is done safely.¹ The Bishops' Conference of England and Wales has published its own guidance which covers the same issues and is bespoke for our churches.

These guidelines support the safe and dignified conduct of non-Eucharistic Funeral Services.

Funerals

With the opening of our churches, the pattern of funeral practices which, up to now, have been permitted in chapels at cemeteries and crematoria can now take place in church.

On a separate occasion, a live-streamed celebration of Mass for the repose of the soul of the deceased, in a closed church, could be offered to the family members and friends for them to follow online, but this would be without a congregation and the presence of the body.

Before the Service

There should be good collaboration between the family of the deceased, the funeral director and the clergy to ensure that the numbers of people assembling in the church is limited to the immediate family and those very close to the deceased.² Any interaction with the family should be done safely – this may mean by telephone, Skype, Zoom etc.

It is important to consider the following issues before the service:

1. How many people can attend: As a principle, numbers should be minimised as far as possible. Alongside the member of clergy, Funeral Director and staff, the government advises that only the following should attend:
 - members of the person's household
 - close family members
 - or if the above are unable to attend, close friends

It is important that anyone attending should not exhibit any symptoms of COVID-19 or place themselves at risk. See the Government guidance (footnote 2).

2. The usual guidance on hygiene, hand sanitising and people with symptoms not attending church, as set out in the guidelines for opening for individual prayer, applies.

Preparing the Church for the service

Hand sanitisers should be signposted, readily available and easily accessible. Notices should be clearly placed advising people of correct hygiene practices. Consideration should be given as to the flow of groups in and out of the church to minimise any risk of compromising physical distancing, avoiding overlap between different groups while also leaving time for adequate cleaning. The Church should be well ventilated, preferably by opening windows and doors where possible.

¹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-guidance-for-the-safe-use-of-places-of-worship-during-the-pandemic/covid-19-guidance-for-the-safe-use-of-places-of-worship-during-the-pandemic>

² <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-guidance-for-managing-a-funeral-during-the-coronavirus-pandemic/covid-19-guidance-for-managing-a-funeral-during-the-coronavirus-pandemic>

Safeguarding the Priest/Deacon/Minister from infection

Clergy should remain mindful of their own personal hygiene, sanitising/washing their hands before and after the service and again after the committal. Physical contact with mourners and the coffin containing the body is to be avoided.

Physical contact

While it is contrary to human instinct and normal pastoral practice, it is important to advise mourners that there should be no physical contact including shaking hands, hugging or kissing outside their own households.

Reception of Remains

The coffin should be brought into the church on a trolley, supplied by the Funeral Directors, and should be manoeuvred by them alone. There should be no placing of a funeral pall over the coffin or the Christian symbols, flowers or other objects.

During the Service

At this time, there should be no singing. Single-use service sheets can be provided which the participants should take with them as they leave the church. In light of the Government advice, additional people are not encouraged to attend the service, such as an organist, vergers, sound system operator etc.

If the family are to participate in the Liturgy of the Word, then they should be provided with single-use gloves. They should avoid unnecessary contact with any microphone or the prepared lectionary or the book containing the Prayer of the Faithful. Portable microphones should not be used or passed from hand to hand.

After the Service

The church should be closed after the funeral service has finished in order to clean the space according to the Bishops' Conference guidelines on individual prayer. Those cleaning afterwards should wear appropriate equipment (gloves/apron) as set out in the guidance on opening churches for individual prayer.

If there is cause for concern regarding the possible contamination of clerical vestments, these should be washed in accordance with the manufacturer's instructions, using the warmest water setting allowed for the fabric and allowing time for them to dry completely.

The Committal

The management of people at the place of committal comes under the local regulations of the cemetery or the crematorium, and these should be observed.

Rev. Canon Christopher Thomas

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