

November 2, 2007

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

November is often called the “Month of All Souls,” a special time to pray for those who have died. On the four weekends of November I’ll be writing about how Catholic Christians pray for the dead and I’ll do that through the rites and prayers of the ritual book we use at the time of death, *The Order of Christian Funerals (OCF)*.

Some of us remember when wakes were several days long. Some of us remember when wakes were held not in a funeral home but in the family’s home. Many will remember praying the Rosary at a wake. Some will remember breathing a sigh of relief on the way into a funeral home when seeing the priest (the Rosary done!) on his way out. Times change, our customs change and the prayer of the church has changed, too. Today, a wake is often referred to as *visiting hours* or *visitation*. The Church calls this time a *vigil*. For the vigil the OCF provides a service of prayer for the deceased and for the family as they welcome the company and condolences of visiting friends. The *Vigil* prayer may be led by a priest, a deacon or another pastoral minister. In our parish Sr. Rose Marie or I or one of the deacons lead this prayer.

Sometimes, the minister will arrive before the announced visiting hours begin (or just after they are over) to pray with the family before (or after) a number of people have gathered. This is not done to exclude visitors from the prayer but rather to respect the fact that often a large number of people will be in line waiting to greet the family. This practice also allows those closest to the deceased to gather together in prayer as a family.

The *Vigil* prayer begins with a greeting, much like the one we use at Mass, after which a song may be sung. An *Invitation to Prayer* then calls those present to open their hearts to God for the one who has died and for themselves in their grief. A short scripture reading follows and then a responsorial psalm is prayed. There may be prayers of the faithful which conclude with the Lord’s Prayer. A concluding prayer and blessing complete the service. As you can see, this is a *Liturgy of the Word*, similar to but shorter than the same component of our Sunday liturgy. The *Invitation to Prayer* helps us understand the meaning of this service:

*My brothers and sisters,  
we believe that all the ties of friendship and affection  
which knit us as one throughout our lives  
do not unravel with death.  
Confident that God always remembers the good things we have done  
and forgives our sins,  
let us pray, asking God to gather (name) to himself.*

This prayer expresses our belief that the love and relationship we shared with the deceased does not end with death but endures into eternity. The text also reminds us of our need for and God’s willingness to forgive our sins.

The opening prayer for the Vigil says it beautifully:

*For those who believe in your love  
death is not the end*

*nor does it destroy the bonds that you forge in our lives.  
We share the faith of your Son's disciples  
and the hope of the children of God.  
Bring the light of Christ's resurrection to this time of testing and pain  
as we pray for (name) and for those who love him/her.*

We have a duty as Christians, not just as family and friends, to console those who are grieving the loss of a loved one. Jesus himself is seen in the gospels consoling others upon the death of their loved one. Coming to the visiting hours and/or to the funeral liturgy are gestures of love, care and Christian charity.

You may have had the opportunity to attend a *Vigil* in a church. It is customary for priests to be waked in a church but you may not know that this is a possibility for all of us. St. Elizabeth Parish in Acton often offers this option to families when planning funeral rites.

If you have any questions about the Church's prayers and rites at the time of death, please let me know and I'll try to respond to them in this November series of letters. You can email me at **FrAustinFleming@aol.com** or you can write me at **55 Church Street, Concord, MA 01742**.

I'll conclude this letter with one of the options for the blessing at the *Vigil for the Deceased*. This one is my favorite:

*May the love of God  
and the peace of our Lord Jesus Christ  
bless and console you  
and gently wipe every tear from your eyes:  
in the name of the Father,  
and of the Son,  
and of the Holy Spirit.*

Sincerely,

Fr. Fleming