



# Catholic Diocese of Saginaw

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† Offices of Christian Service & Liturgy

**BLESSED ARE THOSE WHO MOURN**



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

# BLESSED ARE THOSE WHO MOURN

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

### A Pastoral 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 guidelines 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. The creation of these pastoral notes are intended to assist pastors, pastoral administrators, 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 prayers 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?**

Unusual as it may seem, it has been found that this is a request not always understood or honored by priests and other pastoral ministers. As a general pastoral 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.  
[NB: 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 or pastoral administrator 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). It should be noted that the special rite for “Final Commendation for an Infant” (**OCF** # 337-342) is 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 suitable?**

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 as well.

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

[NB: This is no longer called “Mass of the Angels”; rather a “Funeral Liturgy” as prescribed in the current liturgical books.]

## **8. What about 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, pastoral administrator, deacon, or pastoral minister and arrange for the “Blessing of Parents After a Miscarriage.”

## **9. What are the Liturgical Rites for Deceased Children and their families?**

[NB: See chart “Catholic Liturgical Rites for Deceased Children and Their Families” on page 7.]

## **10. What about 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 an appropriate opportunity to celebrate the “Rite of Blessing of a Child Within the Womb,” (available through the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops [USCCB] Secretariat for Divine Worship or the diocesan Office of Liturgy) or a “Blessing of Parents” found in the ***Book of Blessings***.

### **11. What about 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 Saint John Paul II may be a source of solace to mothers concerned 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 Diocese of Saginaw’s post-abortion ministry is Project Rachel, a ministry of the USCCB. This healing and reconciling program is offered through the Office of Christian Service. For additional information, consult the USCCB website: [www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/human-life-and-dignity/abortion/project-rachel/index.cfm](http://www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/human-life-and-dignity/abortion/project-rachel/index.cfm) or the diocesan Office of Christian Service at (989) 797-6646.

Further counseling services are available through Catholic Family Services of the Diocese of Saginaw. They can be reached at (989) 797-6638.

# Catholic Liturgical Rites for Deceased Children and Their Families

Liturgical Rite	Minister	Notes
Order for Blessing of Parents after Miscarriage, <i>Book of Blessings</i> , p. 86	Priest, Deacon, Lay Minister	<i>For use in hospital chapel, home, or church</i>
Prayers after Death, <i>Order of Christian Funerals</i> , (OCF) #101 - 108	Priest, Deacon, Lay Minister	<i>To be adapted for children</i>
Gathering in the Presence of the Body OCF, #109 - 118	Priest, Deacon or Lay Minister	<i>To be adapted for children</i>
Vigil for A Deceased Child, OCF, #243 - 263	Priest, Deacon or Lay Minister	<i>Prayers and Scripture may be selected. For use in church, hospital chapel, home, or funeral home</i>
Funeral Liturgy, OCF, #264-294	Priest	<i>Prayers and Scriptures may be selected. For the unbaptized, the rites are adapted *See OCF rubrics</i>
Funeral Liturgy outside Mass OCF, #295 - 315	Priest or Deacon or Lay Minister (in the absence of a Priest or Deacon)	<i>Prayers and Scripture may be selected. For the unbaptized, the rites are adapted. For use in church, funeral home, or hospital chapel</i>
Rite of Committal, OCF, #316 - 326	Priest, Deacon, or Lay Minister	<i>At cemetery after Funeral Liturgy</i>
Rite of Committal with Final Commendation, OCF, #327 - 336	Priest, Deacon, or Lay Minister	<i>At cemetery when Funeral Liturgy has not been celebrated</i>
Rite of Final Commendation for an Infant, OCF, #337 - 342	Priest, Deacon, or Lay Minister	<i>For use at cemetery, in a home, hospital chapel or funeral home (with or without body present)</i>

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*Adapted and used with permission from the Offices of Worship of the Archdioceses of Boston and Cincinnati and provided by the Offices of Christian Service and Liturgy of the Diocese of Saginaw  
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## **APPENDIX**

[From *THE ORDER OF CHRISTIAN FUNERALS*]

### **PART II: FUNERAL RITES FOR CHILDREN (234-242)**

#### ***VIGIL FOR A DECEASED CHILD***

- Vigil for a Deceased Child (243-263)
  - Introductory Rites
  - Liturgy of the Word
  - Prayer of Intercession
  - Concluding Rite

#### ***FUNERAL LITURGY FOR A DECEASED CHILD***

- Funeral Mass (276-294)
  - Introductory Rites
  - Liturgy of the Word
  - Liturgy of the Eucharist
  - Final Commendation
  - Procession to the Place of Committal
- Funeral Liturgy Outside Mass (295-315)
  - Introductory Rites
  - Liturgy of the Word
  - Final Commendation
  - Procession to the Place of Committal
- Rite of Committal (316-342)
  - Rite of Committal (316-326)
  - Invitation
  - Committal
  - Prayer over the People
- Rite of Committal with Final Commendation (327-336)
  - Invitation
  - Invitation to Prayer
  - Prayer over the People
- Rite of Commendation for an Infant (337-342)

### **Part III: TEXTS OF SACRED SCRIPTURE (343-347)**

- Funerals for Adults
- Funerals for Baptized Children
- Funerals for Children Who Died Before Baptism
- Antiphons and Psalms

## **PASTORAL COMMENTARY ON CHILDREN AND THE ORDER OF CHRISTIAN FUNERALS**

The second part of the *Order of Christian Funerals* provides rites for funerals of infants (including unbaptized infants whose parents intended to have them baptized) and young children. The **OCF** stresses how overwhelming the death of any infant or child can be for the family and points out that the compassionate presence of the community reflects the compassionate presence of Christ. It goes on to suggest that parents who have lost children of their own may have a special ministry to the newly bereaved family (**OCF**, 239-240).

If the child died before being baptized, the minister does not sprinkle the body with holy water and does not use the pall. In place of these, the **OCF** has a brief address by the minister (**OCF**, 249). The funeral liturgy continues in the usual manner. Before the final commendation begins, a member or friend of the family may speak in remembrance of the deceased child (**OCF**, 309).

The rite of committal has three forms, the third being a rite of final commendation of an infant. This last form is also used for a stillborn or a newborn infant who dies shortly after birth. It is a short rite of prayer with the parents in the hospital or place of birth. It may also be used at the time of the committal of the body. (**OCF**, 318).

### **Pastoral Note:**

*If children attend the funeral rites, those planning the liturgy should plan with these children in mind, allowing the children when possible to exercise some of the liturgical roles. Depending on the age and number of the children attending, those planning the liturgy should use the recommended adaptations in the Directory for Masses with Children. Such adaptations include having one reading, the Gospel, and taking care that the homilist is a person who can talk with children.*