

END OF LIFE ISSUES

A Pastoral Resource from The Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Washington



The Roman Catholic
Archdiocese of
Washington

INTRODUCTION

Support

Please note that Catholic Cemeteries of the Archdiocese of Washington is available to support you as you move through this process.

Please visit their website at <https://ccaw.org> for more resources.

Your pastor and parish staff are also available to help guide you through this experience. We encourage you to reach out to your parish for more information on specialized grief groups, funeral services, and Mass intentions for your loved ones.

The reality of the finality of death may give a sense of urgency to our lives. Each of us may experience grief in different ways, and at different times. Grief and loss, and the associated feelings of anxiety and uncertainty, can make it even more challenging to think through questions about end of life morality and funeral planning.

This resource guide, published by the Archdiocese of Washington, is designed to help accompany you and your family as you begin to explore the many options for funeral and burials in our region. This guide also contains important information about end of life care and grief resources. As Catholics, especially in times of mourning, we seek to recall the suffering of Christ and hold fast to the truth of the Resurrection. We would like to begin this journey by sharing the following prayer:

"For it was you who formed my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works; that I know very well."

United State Conference of Catholic Bishops
[*Prayers for Mourners*](#)

This resource was developed to help you navigate some of the traditions and options for end-of-life-care, funeral planning, and the grieving process. Funerals have changed significantly in the past few decades, and we would like to share with you some of the Catholic teachings that guide our faith and spiritual practices. As you explore the many options for your loved one's funeral, we encourage you to take time to reflect on these teachings and to discern how best you can honor God and your loved ones in these preparations.





END OF LIFE PLANNING

“Respect for life does not demand that we attempt to prolong life by using medical treatments that are ineffective or unduly burdensome. At the same time, intentionally hastening death—whether through drugs or deliberate neglect of basic care—offends our God-given dignity and is never morally permissible.”

USCCB, *To Live Each Day with Dignity*

Each individual will have decisions to make about his or her own end-of-life planning. These decisions include advance care planning, estate planning, and funeral planning.

An **advance care plan**, also known as an advance directive or a living will, is a written statement detailing your desires for medical treatment and decision-making in circumstances in which you are no longer able to express informed consent. Advance care planning is not just for the sick and elderly members of our community. This planning can help each of us prepare for unexpected situations. Contrary to certain stereotypes, advance care planning is not about “restricting” your options for end-of-life care. Rather, an advance care plan allows you to talk about what kind of care you do want.

Also known as a “living will,” advance care planning encourages all people to examine their Catholic values, discern the kind of treatment that is consistent with these values, and share these preferences with loved ones.

The Virtue of Prudence

"Prudence is the virtue that disposes practical reason to discern our true good in every circumstance and to choose the right means of achieving it" (Catechism of the Catholic Church, no. 1806). Prudence helps us to seek the most good, while minimizing harm, when we are faced with difficult moral dilemmas.

Catholics should use the virtue of prudence in making their own end-of-life decisions, and in assisting friends and family members with these considerations. Each person should be empowered to pursue care that ensures comfort at the end of life, and to discern the kind of treatment that helps to honor his or her dignity. When we are faced with difficult moral decisions about end-of-life care, we are encouraged to take time in prayer and discernment and, when helpful, to seek out the advice of a priest or lay minister with expertise in this area.

Our faith emphasizes the importance of human life and dignity in all stages. Catholics should think critically about what kind of healthcare treatment they wish to receive in their final stages of life but are encouraged to seek care that will provide them with comfort and consolation. At the end of life, pain medication and other treatments will often allow a person to enjoy their final moments, spend time with family, and communicate their final wishes. Catholics are encouraged to pursue treatment that helps to improve quality of life, and hospice and palliative care programs often help to achieve this goal. All care should be intended to relieve pain and provide comfort; treatment should not be intended to intentionally hasten death, and all forms of euthanasia or physician-assisted suicide offend the dignity of each human person.

The Maryland Catholic Conference has published a booklet entitled "Comfort and Consolation." This document provides information on hospice and palliative care, advance care planning, and other relevant topics as you and your family begin to prepare an advance care plan.

8 Principles of Catholic Teaching on End of Life Care

A Resource from the Maryland Catholic Conference¹

1. We do not have the right to take our own lives nor to directly bring about the death of any person.
2. Each of us is obliged to care for the gift of life and health that God has given us.
3. No patient is obliged to accept or demand useless or excessively burdensome medical interventions.
4. The human person always has dignity, even in suffering.
5. Even when we cannot cure, we can always care.
6. There is a presumption of providing food and fluid unless it is futile or death is imminent.
7. Patients in end-stage conditions or a persistent vegetative state possess dignity and deserve good care.
8. Preparation for death can be a beautiful time to reconcile with family, friends and God.

¹ Catholic Bishops of Maryland. "Comfort and Consolation: Care of the Sick and Dying." Maryland Catholic Conference, 2014. Last modified 2014. Accessed February 26, 2021. https://d3n8a8pro7vhmx.cloudfront.net/mdcatholic/pages/311/attachments/original/1599506219/comfort_consolation-rev2020.pdf?1599506219.

What is the difference between hospice and palliative care?

- **Hospice care** provides treatment for people in the final stages of an illness. Hospice allows people to live their life fully as they prepare for a peaceful death.
- **Palliative care** is specialized medical care for people living with a serious illness. This type of care is focused on providing relief from the symptoms and stress of the illness. The goal is to improve quality of life for both the patient and the family. Palliative care is provided by a specially-trained team of doctors, nurses and other specialists who work together with a patient's other doctors to provide an extra layer of support. Palliative care is based on the needs of the patient, not on the patient's prognosis. It is appropriate at any age and at any stage in a serious illness, and it can be provided along with curative treatment.

A NOTE ON HOSPICE AND PALLIATIVE CARE

"There is no human life more sacred than another, just as there is no human life qualitatively more significant than another. The credibility of a health care system is not measured solely by efficiency, but above all by the attention and love given to the person, whose life is always sacred and inviolable."

Address of Holy Father Francis to Participants in the Meeting Organized by the International Federation of Catholic Medical Associations, September 20, 2013

Catholic teaching prioritizes comfort and consolation for the sick and dying. Catholic moral theology prohibits treatment that is intended to bring about the death of any human person, but that does not mean that Catholics do not have choices to guide their end-of-life treatment. Each of us is called to discern the type of treatment that we would choose for ourselves, and to share this information with those closest to us.

Catholic moral theology upholds palliative and hospice care. Each person deserves dignity throughout their life, and especially in their final hours. The Catholic Church supports the use of pain-managing medications, provided that these treatments are used with the intention of comforting a patient.

Early palliative care can actually improve quality of life and decrease depressive symptoms. Numerous studies have shown that patients who receive palliative care report a greater sense of peace with improved mental health outcomes, and might even live longer.²

Hospice and palliative care offer individuals, and their families, the ability to live out their final days to the fullest extent possible. Catholics are not discouraged from the use of these medical services; rather, all Catholics are encouraged to seek out medical care that will bring them **comfort and consolation**.

² Jennifer S. Temel, M.D., et al. "Early Palliative Care for Patients with Metastatic Non-Small-Cell Lung Cancer." *New England Journal of Medicine* 363 (August 2010): 733-742. <https://nejm.org/doi/full/10.1056/NEJMoa1000678>



Anointing of the Sick

The Anointing of the Sick is not a sacrament for those only who are on the point of death. Hence, as soon as anyone of the faithful begins to be in danger of death from sickness or old age, the fitting time for him to receive the sacrament has certainly come" (CCC, no. 1514)

The Sacrament of Anointing of the Sick, also known as Extreme Unction or Last Rites, can be offered at any time when a person is experiencing serious illness or the risk of death. Like Jesus' ministry to the sick, where even His touch could provide relief from a physical ailment, Anointing of Sick provides spiritual and physical relief to those who are sick or suffering.

Anointing of the Sick may be offered to any person in need of healing for a physical ailment, mental illness, or spiritual struggle. Especially in times of severe or chronic illness, or when dealing with the challenges of old age, the Sacrament of Anointing of the Sick is a powerful moment of grace that offers healing, peace and the strength through Christ, the Divine Physician.



PREPARING FOR A PEACEFUL DEATH

"If pastoral and personal considerations allow, the period before death may be an appropriate time to plan the funeral rites with the family and even with the family member who is dying. Although planning the funeral before death should be approached with sensitivity and care, it can have the effect of helping the one who is dying and the family face the reality of death with Christian hope. It can also help relieve the family of numerous details after the death and may allow them to benefit more fully from the celebration of the funeral rites."
(Order of Christian Funerals), #17

Many would prefer to avoid thinking about illness and death. The reality, however, is that death is the only life event that will happen to every person. Each of us can prepare for a peaceful death by creating an advance healthcare plan and participating in the planning for our funeral, estate planning, and any other family matters.

As you prepare for the final stages of life, either for yourself or a family member, consider planning for a visit from a parish priest so that he can offer sacraments and respond to any questions or concerns you might have about end-of-life planning. If you or your loved one are already in a hospital setting, please know that most parishes are connected to hospital systems through a chaplaincy contact or phone line. You should contact the hospital chaplaincy office to request a visit.



The staff at Catholic Cemeteries can help with the practical aspects of planning after death. Please consider making an appointment with Catholic Cemeteries, and the staff will walk through the process of planning for a Catholic funeral and burial, step by step. Catholic Cemeteries can be reached through their website at <https://ccaw.org>

PLANNING AFTER DEATH

“At the death of a Christian, whose life of faith was begun in the waters of Baptism and strengthened at the Eucharistic table, the Church intercedes on behalf of the deceased because of its confident belief that death is not the end, nor does it break the bonds forged in life. The Church also ministers to the sorrowing and consoles them in the funeral rites with the comforting Word of God and the Sacrament of the Eucharist.”
(Order of Christian Funerals), #17

To prepare for a funeral, please contact your parish priest and a funeral home of your choice. The funeral home can help you to prepare for the vigil service and will connect you with Catholic Cemeteries to discuss burial options. However, you might also consider reaching out to Catholic Cemeteries directly, in case your funeral home is not aware of local resources. We have provided here a brief overview of the Catholic funeral rites for your information and reference. In the event that your loved one is not connected with a parish, please contact the Archdiocese of Washington’s Office of Life Issues and we can help connect you with a local priest.

The Catholic funeral rite is divided into three key rituals that help to guide our mourning process. Each of these rituals serves a particular purpose in honoring the dead and serving the living. Most Catholic funerals use all three of these rituals. The following information is provided from the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops:³

Vigil Service (Wake)

“At the vigil, the Christian community keeps watch with the family in prayer to the God of mercy and finds strength in Christ’s presence” (Order of Christian Funerals, no. 56).

The Vigil Service usually takes place during the period of visitation and viewing at the funeral home. Some parishes might also host the wake service, or you might choose to host this event in your home. In these cases, you might speak to your parish priest to ask for his assistance in planning any readings or other traditions. The Vigil Service is a special time to remember the life of the deceased and to commend him or her to God. In prayer we ask God to console us in our grief and give us strength to support one another.

The Vigil Service can take the form of a Service of the Word with readings from Sacred Scripture accompanied by reflection and prayers. It can also take the form of one of the prayers of the Office for the Dead from the Liturgy of the Hours. The clergy and your funeral director can assist in planning such service.

³ “Overview of Catholic Funeral Rites,” United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, accessed February 22, 2021, <https://www.usccb.org/prayer-and-worship/sacraments-and-sacramentals/bereavement-and-funerals/overview-of-catholic-funeral-rites>.



It is most appropriate, when family and friends are gathered together for the Vigil Service, to offer time for recalling the life of the deceased loved one. For this reason, eulogies are usually encouraged to be done at the funeral home during visitation or at the Vigil Service.

Funeral Liturgy

The funeral liturgy is the central liturgical celebration of the Christian community for the deceased. When one of its members dies, the Church encourages the celebration of the funeral liturgy at a Mass. When Mass cannot be celebrated, a funeral liturgy outside Mass can be celebrated at the church or in the funeral home.

At the funeral liturgy, the Church gathers with the family and friends of the deceased loved one to give praise and thanks to God for Christ's victory over sin and death, to commend the deceased to God's tender mercy and compassion, and to seek strength in the proclamation of the Paschal Mystery. The funeral liturgy, therefore, is an act of worship, and not merely an expression of grief.

Rite of Committal (Burial or Interment)

The Rite of Committal, the conclusion of the funeral rite, is the final act of the community of faith in caring for the body of its deceased member. It should normally be celebrated at the place of committal, that is, beside the open grave or place of interment. In committing the body to its resting place, the community expresses the hope that, with all those who have gone before us marked with the sign of faith, the deceased loved one awaits the glory of the Resurrection. The Rite of Committal is an expression of the communion that exists between the Church on Earth and the Church in Heaven: the deceased passes with the farewell prayers of the community of believers into the welcoming company of those who need faith no longer, but see God face-to-face.

Terms and Definitions

An **interment** is the act or ceremony of placing the remains of the deceased in the ground (burial).

An **inurnment** is the act or ceremony of placing cremated remains in an urn.

An **entombment** is the placing of a body in a tomb, crypt, or mausoleum.



A NOTE ON PREPARING FOR THE FUNERAL LITURGY

Funeral liturgies are personal to each family. We encourage you to use this time to reflect on the life of your loved one and their requests for their funeral.

During the Rite of Christian Burial, we celebrate a life lived in faith and hope. The rituals of the liturgy are founded in the Celebration of the Eucharist. As Christians, we celebrate the lives of our loved ones in the celebration of Christ's Life, Death and Resurrection, and with the hope that we will share in this gift.

Your parish can assist you in selecting appropriate readings, music and prayers for the funeral liturgy. Family members are encouraged to take part in the planning process. Depending on parish custom, family members may serve in the liturgies :

- Reader
- Usher
- Placing a Crucifix and Bible on the casket
- Bringing up the Gifts
- Placing pall on the coffin

For more information on readings and music for the Rite of Christian Burial, please visit one of the following resources, or visit our website at <https://adw.org/living-the-faith/marriage-family/end-life-care>

Resources for Funeral Planning and Vigil Services (Catholic Burial Traditions)

Resources for families and pastoral staff who are preparing for prayer vigils and services. This website offers information for all who are seeking more information on Catholic traditions:
<https://catholicburialtraditions.org>

Resources for Families and Ministers (Catholic Cemeteries Conference)

Information and resources for ministers and families who are exploring options for Catholic funeral planning:
<https://catholiccemeteryconference.org>

Catholic Cemeteries (Archdiocese of Washington)

Information and resources on preparing for funeral and burial rites, as well as next steps and information on various services and cemetery locations available in the Archdiocese of Washington:
<https://www.ccaw.org/death-in-the-family>

Charity Burial Program

There are financial assistance programs available to help families who need help preparing for the funeral of a loved one. Please contact your parish priest for more information.



DISCERNING BURIAL AND CREMATION

Burial

Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God, and that you are not your own? For you were bought with a price; therefore glorify God in your body.

Corinthians 6:19-20

Burial in a Catholic cemetery honors the body and its sacramentality. Each of the rites that we follow, including the Vigil, Funeral Mass, and Burial, is intended to honor the dead while also providing some comfort to the living.

Throughout our lives, we have received sacraments that sanctify our body and grant special forms of grace. In order to honor our bodies and the sacraments we have received, all Catholics are encouraged to seek burial in a Catholic cemetery. Christian burial is a special time of prayer as we remember the Resurrection of Christ and anticipate our own Resurrection in Christ.

Cremation

Although cremation is now permitted by the Church, it does not enjoy the same value as burial of the body. The Church clearly prefers and urges that the body of the deceased be present for the funeral rites, since the presence of the human body better expresses the values which the Church affirms in those rites.

(Order of Christian Funerals, 413)

The Church does not prohibit cremation unless it was chosen for reasons contrary to Christian doctrine.

(Code of Canon Law, c. 1176 § 3)

The Church continues to prefer the practice of burying bodies of the deceased. If cremation is chosen for a reason that does not deny the faith, cremated remains of a body should be treated with same respect given to the corporal remains of a human body. As such, cremation should ordinarily take place following the funeral Mass.

A funeral Mass with the cremated remains requires that every effort be made to treat the ashes with the same respect given to the human body. "This includes the use of worthy vessel to contain the ashes, the manner in which they are carried, the care and attention to appropriate placement and transport, and the final disposition" (Order of Christian Funerals, 417).

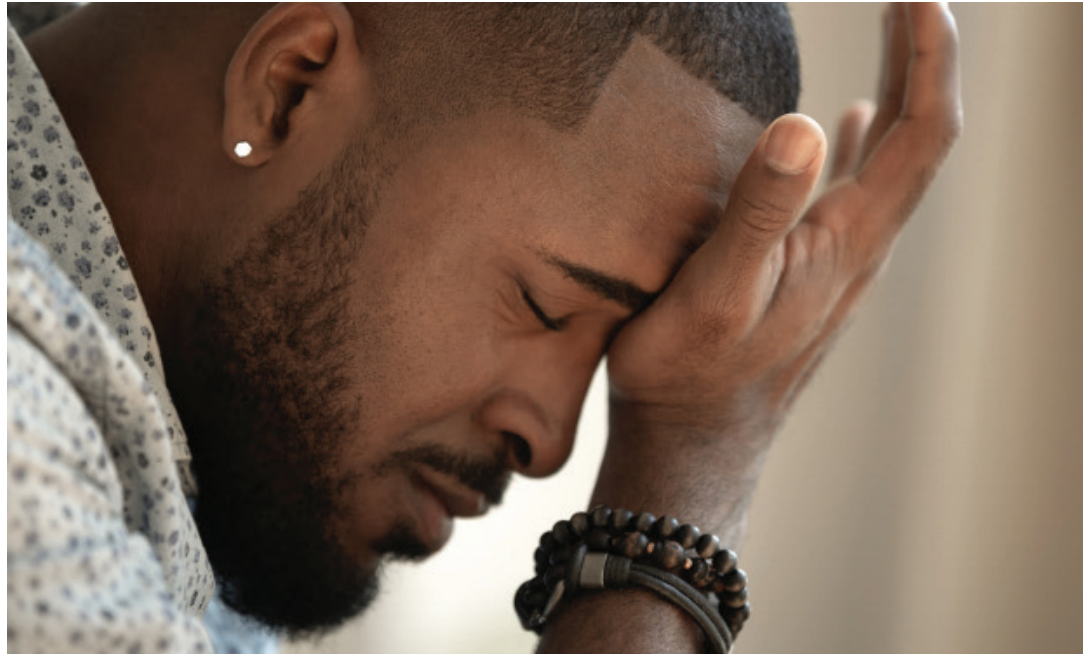
Cremated remains must be laid to rest in a sacred place, preferably a Catholic cemetery or entombed in a mausoleum or columbarium. Scattering the cremated remains, keeping them at home, or dividing them among family members does not reflect the reverent disposition of the remains that the Church requires. Proper burial of cremated remains shows respect for the dead and is an important corporal work of mercy in the Catholic Church. Burial of ashes in a Catholic cemetery, "corresponds to the piety and respect owed to the bodies of the faithful departed who through Baptism have become temples of the Holy Spirit and in which 'as instruments and vessels the Spirit has carried out so many good works'" (Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith's instruction, *Ad Resurgendum cum Christo*).



A Note from the Catholic Cemeteries of the Archdiocese of Washington

Jesus Christ, who has accompanied you and your loved one in life, will walk with you in your path of sorrow. The Church, too, desires to accompany you in this time of loss. Bereavement support groups provide an excellent opportunity for mourners to share their feelings and experiences in a caring, non-judgmental, confidential setting.

Check with your parish about parish bereavement support groups or visit the Catholic Cemeteries of the Archdiocese of Washington Bereavement page for resources: <https://ccaw.org/bereavement>.



ON GRIEF AND GRIEVING

When Mary came to where Jesus was and saw him, she fell at his feet and said to him, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." When Jesus saw her weeping and the Jews who had come with her weeping, he became perturbed and deeply troubled, and said, "Where have you laid him?" They said to him, "Sir, come and see." And Jesus wept. So the Jews said, "See how he loved him."

John 11:32-44

The Gospel miracle of Lazarus reminds us that Jesus, too, wept for the loss of his loved ones. Grief is a deeply personal experience, and one that we often struggle to share with others. The resources below will help to connect you with grief supports from various local communities. We also encourage you to reach out directly to your parish for support. Please see also the attached resource page for more information.

Emmaus Ministry for Grieving Parents

The [Office for Family Life](#) offers evenings of reflection and retreats for grieving parents in collaboration with [Emmaus Ministry for Grieving Parents](#) (<https://www.emfgp.org/>). Parents who have experienced the death of a child, no matter how old the child was or how long ago they died, are welcome to attend. Retreats and evening reflections include a spiritual component as well as a witness by a grieving parent with optional sharing during the sessions. Retreats also offer time for prayer and reflection.

For more information, contact the Office for Family Life at 301-853-4546 or visiblesign@adw.org.

A NOTE ON MISCARRIAGE

"As regards children who have died without Baptism, the Church can only entrust them to the mercy of God... 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 the children come to me, do not hinder them' (Mk 10:14), allow us to hope that there is a way of salvation for children who have died without Baptism."

(CCC no. 1261)

While many couples are hesitant to speak about their experience, statistics show that up to 25% of pregnancies end in a miscarriage before birth. In a 2014 survey conducted by the Archdiocese of Washington's Office of Life Issues, many families in the Archdiocese of Washington reported that they did not know the experience was so common, and they were relieved to find out that they were not alone in this loss.

Many couples also express fear about their future and about God's desires for them. This confusion is exacerbated by the language that some use to describe difficult situations, e.g. "This was God's plan." In order to understand our faith, we must emphasize that God does not provide challenges in order to test our faith. Rather, we are sometimes faced with challenging circumstances and God walks with us during these most difficult times.

Our Catholic teachings remind us that an unborn child has a life that should be celebrated and honored. Many Catholic parents do not know that an unborn child can receive special burial rites. Your child, like all unbaptized children whose parents intend for them to receive the sacraments, will be welcomed into God's loving arms. Parents are encouraged to meet with their pastor and even to celebrate their child's life with a naming ceremony and burial rites, when they are ready for these steps. Special grief ministries are available at many parishes, and Catholic Cemeteries of the Archdiocese of Washington has a specially designated area and support program to celebrate the lives of pre-born children.



**Secretariat for
Pastoral Ministry
and Social Concerns
(Archdiocese of
Washington)**

Supports are available through the Office of Life Issues and the Office of Family Life.

For more information, please contact:

Kathryn Yanik
Director of Life Issues
Archdiocese of Washington
prolife@adw.org

Sally Daniel
Director of the Office for Family Life
Archdiocese of Washington
DanielS@adw.org

RESOURCES

Prayers for Death and Dying (USCCB)

For a collection of scripture verses and passages, as well as prayers for death and dying, visit the following website:

<https://www.usccb.org/prayer-and-worship/sacraments-and-sacramentals/bereavement-and-funerals/prayers-for-death-and-dying>

Care of the Dying: A Catholic Perspective (Catholic Health Association)

An article about end-of-life planning, death and dying, and grief and grieving in the Catholic tradition:

<https://www.chausa.org/publications/health-progress/article/june-1993/care-of-the-dying-a-catholic-perspective>

Grief Counseling Resources (Stella Maris)

Resources for individual and family counseling from Stella Maris, a long-term care and nursing home facility in Timonium, MD. Resources include guides for grief, counseling, and support groups:

<https://www.stellamaris.org/health-services/resources-counseling/>

Resources for Funeral Planning and Vigil Services (Catholic Burial Traditions)

Resources for families and pastoral staff who are preparing for prayer vigils and services. This website offers information for all who are seeking more information on Catholic traditions:

<https://catholicburialtraditions.org/>

Resources for Families and Ministers (Catholic Cemeteries Conference)

Information and resources for ministers and families who are exploring options for Catholic funeral planning:

<https://catholiccemeteryconference.org/>

Grief Support and Other Resources (St. Luke Institute)

Webinars and other supports for families who are dealing with grief, especially during the time of COVID-19:

<https://www.sliconnect.org/product/transformative-grief/>

Catholic Cemeteries (Archdiocese of Washington)

Information and resources on preparing for funeral and burial rites, and information on various services and cemetery locations available in the Archdiocese of Washington:

<https://www.ccaw.org/>





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