

Accompanying Catholic Funeral Masses

A guide for musicians

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Introduction

This guide should be of help to musicians of other Christian denominations who find themselves being asked to accompany a Funeral Mass in a Catholic church.

Playing for worship in a church that is not your own can be a bewildering experience, and if you are not familiar with the structure of the Catholic liturgy it can be quite difficult to know when and what you are expected to play. And of course funerals are always sensitive occasions and you want to do your best to make sure that everything runs smoothly and as expected.

I have included information about everything you might normally be expected to accompany, but there are no hard and fast rules and so it is always important to talk to the priest to find out what is wanted for a particular funeral. I have also included hints about 'cues' and what to listen and look for as the Mass progresses.

Throughout this booklet I refer to the role of 'organist' - but what I write is relevant for any musician accompanying a funeral, whether you are a pianist, guitarist or whatever.

Most of what is written in this booklet applies to accompanying any Catholic Mass (not just funerals) and so it will be helpful to you if you find yourself playing on other occasions, too. However, the ending of an ordinary Mass is different and I have described that at the end of the booklet.

If you are used to playing the organ in a church where the congregation sings well you may be surprised at how poor the singing can be in the Catholic church, especially at a funeral. It's worth being prepared for this as it can be a bit nerve-wracking when people don't join in - or they don't join in a hymn until half way through the first verse, or even later. A lack of singing is not your fault!

What you need to find out beforehand

If the request to play comes from a funeral director, find out who the priest is, what his telephone number is, and phone him up. If it is the priest who contacts you, then it is easier as you are already talking to him (but find out his telephone number in case you need to phone back)

You need to know

THE INSTRUMENT

What kind of an instrument are you being asked to play - piano, organ, 'home'¹ organ?

If you are in doubt as to what it's like and whether you need to know more, don't be afraid to ask to go in and try it in advance of the funeral. (This might be helpful if only to find out how the on/off switch works!)

THE HYMNS TO BE PLAYED

What are the hymns?

When are they to be played? You may be asked to play hymns

- for the entrance procession
- for the procession of gifts
- at Communion
- as the coffin is taken out the church.

¹ By 'home' organ I am referring to an electronic instrument (usually fairly elderly) that has two split keyboards - the problem with these is that the lowest note playable is often F (an octave and a half below middle C). If the music you are intending to use goes lower than this, then this may cause you difficulties.

Is there a music book in the church?

If the hymns are unfamiliar to you, and you are relying on the music being in the church, it may again be best to check it out in advance. Some of the accompaniments in popular Catholic hymn books are not the best, and sometimes there may be awkward page turns. If the hymns are ones you know you may prefer to bring your own music.

WILL ANYTHING ELSE BE SUNG?

This may include

- Responsorial psalm
- Gospel acclamation
- Eucharistic acclamations
 - Holy, Holy, Holy (Sanctus)
 - Memorial acclamation
 - Amen
- Lamb of God
- Song of farewell.

You will need to get music for all of these. Accompanying the psalm will usually include working with a solo singer.

MUSIC AS PEOPLE ARRIVE

Is it customary in this church to play music as people arrive for a funeral?

Other options and possibilities

VIGIL FOR THE DECEASED WITH RECEPTION AT THE CHURCH

Usually the coffin is brought into the church the evening before the Funeral Mass. Infrequently you may be requested also to accompany this short ceremony. There will usually only be two hymns. You need to know when to play them - it is probably easiest to ask the priest to announce them.

FUNERAL SERVICE WITH A LITURGY OF THE WORD ONLY

Very rarely, funeral services are held without the celebration of Mass. In this situation, the sections from 'The preparation of gifts' to 'Communion hymn' (as detailed below) do not apply.

A PROMPTER?

You may feel more confident playing for your first funeral if you have a regular Mass attender sat or stood next to you, and 'prompting' you or confirming to you when to play. You may know someone who could help in this way, or the priest may be able to suggest someone. The person needs to be able to be clear and directive in manner (not hesitant).

However, whether this is appropriate or not may depend on the location of the organ. If it's hidden away at the back of a balcony - no problem - but if it's right at the front of the church this might not be such a good idea!

The New Roman Missal

A Revised Roman Missal was introduced in late 2011, and the words of many of the peoples' prayers and responses spoken or sung during Mass were slightly changed.

For this reason most Catholic churches now hand out an 'Order of Mass' card to everyone attending, to help them join in and become familiar with the new words.

It would be very helpful to you to pick up one of these cards in advance of your first Catholic funeral, as they are an excellent aid to familiarising yourself with the Order of Mass and its component parts.

Even if you don't get hold of one in advance, it may be a useful aid to you at the funeral; and if you think you are likely to be playing regularly in the Catholic church, take one home and study it.

When you arrive at the church

If you haven't already done so, check out the organ! It can be hard to know what settings to use, and what it sounds like round the church (as distinct from where you are sitting!) especially if it is an electronic instrument. I usually assume that the normal organist knows best, and leave 'electronic' settings as I find them.

Pick up an order of service if there is one. Check it through to make sure everything is as you are expecting. Be aware that Catholics often cut the verses of hymns - so make sure the hymns as printed have the same number of verses as you are expecting. If there isn't an order of service it would be worth asking the priest if he is expecting you to play all the verses of the hymns. This can seem a strange thing to need to ask if you are used to playing everything - but in a Catholic church it is a normal enough question!

You need to check with the priest whether or not he is announcing the hymns (usually they don't) - but don't panic, instructions as to when to play are given in the sections that follow!

There are other 'cues' that you need to know from him, especially the 'signal' for the start of Mass, and these too are mentioned in the sections that follow.

From the priest's point of view it may be a bit bewildering why you are asking so many questions - he will have conducted funerals the way-he-conducts-funerals for many years and may not understand that you don't know or want clarified things that are obvious to him. This can even be the case if you are an experienced Catholic organist playing in a new location!

Music during the Funeral Mass

Entrance hymn

The funeral usually starts with the first hymn (and it is not usually announced). The cue is usually a bell being rung; or perhaps the priest says 'please stand'; or you see that the priest is ready to enter the church. Check with him what the cue is.

If you need to respond to a bell, it is probably worth making sure you stop playing any soft 'arrival' music about a minute before the Mass is due to commence. This ensures you have time to change your music over to the hymn and reset the organ if needed. You are expected to start playing immediately at the bell.

If the coffin has not been brought into the church the evening before things may be slightly different, the priest may say a few short prayers and/or scripture sentences before the first hymn. Check this with him.

In Catholic churches musical introductions are usually short. The first or (if it is musically more appropriate) the last line of the hymn will usually suffice.

Responsorial Psalm and Gospel Acclamation

The Liturgy of the Word follows the introductory rites. At a weekend Mass it comprises

- First reading (Old Testament)
- Responsorial psalm
- Second reading (New Testament)
- Gospel acclamation
- Gospel reading.

The same applies for a Funeral Mass, except there is sometimes only one reading before the Gospel.

The psalm is either read or sung. It may be that the congregation sings a well known hymn eg 'The Lord's my shepherd', in which case things are easy for you.

However, there may be a soloist (cantor). If so, the psalm usually has a response line which the congregation join in singing in between the verses. The pattern for accompanying is as follows.

Organ introduction (the response)
Cantor sings response
Congregation sings response
Cantor sings first verse
Congregation sings response
Cantor sings second verse
. . . . etc
(Ends with everyone singing response.)

If there is a cantor, then they will usually sing the Gospel acclamation too. The Gospel acclamation consists of the singing of an 'alleluia', a Gospel verse, and then the 'alleluia' again. (If it is Lent - ie the six and a half weeks before Easter - a short sentence called a Lenten acclamation is sung instead of the 'alleluia'). The pattern for accompanying this is

Organ introduction (music to 'alleluia')
Cantor sings 'alleliua'
Congregation sings 'alleluia'
Cantor sings Gospel verse
Congregation sings 'alleluia'.

If there is a cantor, make sure you practice with them (or at least talk things through with them) beforehand so you both are confident about what is happening.

If there is no cantor, the priest may still want the 'alleluia' sung. Check this with him (and how he wants it done) but the normal pattern would be

Organ introduction (music to 'alleluia')
Congregation sings 'alleluia'
Reader reads Gospel verse
Congregation sings 'alleluia'.

It will help you to start the alleluia again at the end if you know what the text of the Gospel verse is.

If there is a first and second reading, then you start the psalm at the end of the first reading (the reader ends with 'The word of the Lord' and the congregation responds 'Thanks be to God').

You start the Gospel acclamation after the second reading (again after 'Thanks be to God'); but be alert, some priests like to say 'please stand' at this point.

If there is only one reading, the psalm comes after it, and then the Gospel acclamation immediately follows the psalm. So check with the priest whether there will be one or two readings (in addition to the Gospel).

The preparation of gifts

After the readings there will usually be a homily, followed by the prayer of the faithful (often known as bidding prayers). The bidding prayers are usually led by a reader, but they always conclude with a final prayer by the priest, and the congregation responding 'Amen'. The congregation sits (and the priest may say 'please sit').

In the past the preparation of gifts was commonly referred to as the offertory - some priests may still use this term.

The bread and wine for consecration (the 'gifts') are now brought to the altar. Usually they are carried up the central aisle from the back of the church, occasionally this doesn't happen and they are already on a side table next to the altar.

You may be asked to play a hymn at this stage, or some quiet music, or there may be silence.

If it's a hymn (or music) you start immediately the congregation sits. When you stop is harder to work out!

If it's a hymn, just play it all through (unless you know the verses are to be cut).

If you're playing soft music, check with the priest when he wants you to stop. This may be as the people bringing forward the gifts hand them to the priest. This would be the easiest solution for you if you are inexperienced. The priest will say prayers as he offers the gifts.

However, he may want you to continue playing as he offers the gifts at the altar (he lifts the paten, pours wine and water into the chalice, and then lifts the chalice). After this he washes his fingers and this is the cue to bring the music to a close. (If you get it wrong, he will stand at the altar until you do stop!) You would be advised to play simple music, because until you are used to this, it's necessary to watch the priest quite closely.

Acclamations of the Eucharistic Prayer

These may be said or sung. They include

- Holy, Holy, Holy (Sanctus)
- Memorial acclamation
- Amen.

If you are accompanying them, you should read the following . . .

After the presentation of the gifts the priest leads a prayer, to which the people join in ‘May the Lord accept the sacrifice at your hands’

The priest then says a further prayer. A threefold dialogue with the congregation follows - starting ‘The Lord be with you’ and ending with the congregation saying ‘It is right and just’. (This should be detailed on you Order of Mass card.)

Then the priest says the prayer known as the Preface, and the Holy, Holy, Holy is started immediately after that. It can be difficult to know when the Preface is ended, and so when to start the (short) introduction to the Holy, Holy, Holy. You may want to check the precise text of the Preface with the priest, as several variations can be used. They usually end with references to angels/choirs of angels singing praise and us joining in/acclaiming/proclaiming Sorry it’s impossible to be more precise! A visual cue is that the priest puts his hands together towards the end/at the end of the Preface (but that’s only helpful to you if you can actually see him).

The cue for the Memorial acclamation is easier to describe. The priest consecrates the bread (‘this is my body’ etc or similar words), genuflects, consecrates the wine (‘this is the chalice of my blood’ etc or similar words), genuflects, then says or sings ‘The mystery of faith’. You then play the introduction to the Memorial acclamation.

The Amen comes a little further on in the Eucharistic prayer after the priest says or sings a short prayer that begins ‘Through him, and with him, and in him and ends ‘all glory and honour is yours, for ever and ever.’ If this prayer is said, then the congregation usually say ‘Amen’; if it is sung, then you may be asked to accompany the ‘Amen’ or the congregation may be expecting to sing a short unaccompanied ‘Amen’. Check with the priest what is expected.

Lamb of God

The Lord's prayer is after the Amen, and then the 'sign of peace' is shared. The Lamb of God is after the sign of peace. It may be sung or spoken. If it is to be sung, give the congregation time to greet each other, and make sure that the priest has returned to the altar (if he has moved away from it) and is ready to break the host (bread) in the paten before starting to play.

Communion hymn

If you are not a Catholic you aren't able to receive Communion, but if you wish you can join the Communion lines and approach the priest for a blessing - the customary way of showing this is what you want is to cross your arms over your chest (hands by your shoulders) as you reach the priest.

If there is a Communion hymn, it is best not to start too soon, but to make sure that some of the congregation have returned to their seats after Communion and so are able to sing. However, sometimes at funerals not many people go to Communion and this can be difficult to judge. If you misjudge, then it's not too late to start as the priest returns to the sanctuary (altar area) after distributing Communion - in which case it has become a post-Communion hymn! Don't be surprised if the Communion hymn is sung badly - sometimes it improves as you go through the verses.

Alternatively you may be asked simply to play gentle music during Communion; if so, stop when everyone has received Communion and the priest returns to the sanctuary.

Song of farewell

At the end of Communion there is a prayer. After this there may be announcements, or a talk by a family member.

The final commendation begins with an invitation to prayer (usually read from a green book). Then the coffin may be sprinkled with holy water and incensed.

A song of farewell may be said or sung - if you are required to accompany it talk through with the priest when you are expected to begin playing.

The prayer of final commendation follows. The priest then says 'In peace let us take (name) to his/her place of rest'. This is the cue for you to play the introduction to the final hymn (but beware sometimes the priest may add something like 'and as we go we will sing . . . '). You play the hymn as the coffin is taken out the church (and the family usually follow it) - this can seem strange if you are not used to this custom.

If there are a lot of people remaining in the church after the hymn has finished, you may want to play soft music as the church empties.

How Mass ends if it is not a funeral

I indicated earlier that this guide applies for accompanying 'normal' as well as Funeral Masses.

After Communion at the end of a Sunday Mass there is again a prayer.

There may be notices given. Then the priest will give a blessing. Then follows the dismissal, usually either

'Go forth, the Mass is ended' - or

'Go and announce the Gospel of the Lord' - or

'Go in peace, glorifying the Lord by your life'

to which the people respond

'Thanks be to God'.

You then start the recessional hymn.

Afterwards

After accompanying your first Catholic Funeral Mass you will probably feel quite daunted! You will probably be wondering whether your playing was as expected.

But if you begin to play regularly you will grow in confidence. Don't be afraid to ask people afterwards (and the priest before the next funeral) whether you got things right!

And if you do find out you made some mistakes - don't worry. Even seasoned Catholic organists get things wrong sometimes!