

Baptismal Symbols at Funerals

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At the beginning of a funeral, the body is greeted at the church's entrance, which often is nearby the baptismal font. The entryway is a threshold, a place of transition that is neither inside nor outside. In funeral liturgies, the space marks the transition of the deceased person from earthly life to eternal life. The symbols of Baptism, symbols that mark the transition of the person from non-faith to new life in Christ, are also present at the beginning of the funeral rites. There, we see holy water, white in the pall that will be placed over the coffin, the Paschal candle, and possibly the use of incense.

SPRINKLING WITH HOLY WATER

On Easter Sunday, we renew our baptismal promises as we are sprinkled with holy water. During funeral liturgies, the casket is likewise sprinkled with holy water. The person who began life as a Christian disciple in Baptism is, even in death, still a disciple, though his/her life has changed by a deeper participation in Christ's eternal life. Just as Baptism was not an end to growing deeper in faith, so too in death, the disciple will continue to grow deeper in Christ's life. Death is not end, but a transition.

CASKET/COFFIN

The font is a place of transition, a transition from death to new life, which means that the font is literally a coffin, a place where one is buried in the hope of rising just as Christ rose from the dead. Christ's victory over death is our path to new life in Christ. The casket/coffin is "a new font," a place of transition from earthly death to eternal life with Christ. The coffin is a symbol of being born into eternal life. After the coffin is sprinkled with holy water at the threshold, a pall is placed over the casket.

PALL

The pall, the long, white cloth that covers the casket at funerals, is another baptismal symbol. During the baptismal rite, a white gown, a symbol of new life in Christ, is worn. The placement of the pall recognizes that the deceased person is clothed with Christ.

PASCHAL CANDLE

During the Entrance Hymn, the casket is processed forward and placed near the sanctuary, where the Liturgies of the Word and the Eucharist occur. Baptism leads to new life in Christ, which is directed to the Word and Table of Christ. His words are proclaimed in the hope that disciples will be comforted and consoled by his teachings and will seek to live his Word. In the Eucharist, Christians unite their prayers and



During the baptismal rite, the symbols of water, light, and a white garment symbolize new life in Christ. Those same symbols at the funeral signify the eternal life that awaits those baptized in Christ.

lives to Christ in thanksgiving and receive Christ's Body and Blood. Baptismal new life is renewed and strengthened in Eucharistic participation. By placing the casket close to the altar, those gathered remember that the person who has entered eternal life continues to be a member of the Church and continues to pray around the heavenly banquet.

Next to the casket is the Paschal candle, a symbol of Christ, the light that dispels darkness, sin, and death. At Baptism, the newly baptized is given a baptismal candle lit from the Paschal candle. The baptized have not only found new life but are called to be Christ's light within the world.

INCENSE

Incense is not necessarily associated with Baptism but provides baptismal imagery. The body/casket is incensed, perfumed, and enfolded with misty smoke. The body, even in death, still has dignity because the person was not only created in God's image, but also through baptismal waters, is named, marked, and called as Christ's own, Christian. The baptismal symbols at funerals signify not only one's eternal life in Christ but the Church's reverence and care of the human body.

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