

DIOCESE OF DOWN AND CONNOR



[www.downandconnor.org](http://www.downandconnor.org)

# A Family Guide to Planning and Celebrating a Funeral in the Catholic Church

“Do not let your hearts  
be troubled.”  
(John 14:1)



"O precious in the eyes of the Lord  
is the death of his faithful."

(Psalm 115:15)

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Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

In Ireland there are many long standing traditions that show our deep respect for the dignity of death and saying farewell to the people we love. The Christian funeral is of profound importance to Irish society. The rituals surrounding our funerals allow us to pray for the deceased, create an opportunity for the bereaved to mourn and be comforted, and to assure the entire community of the certain hope found in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

In recent times we have seen many changes to funerals: the availability of cremations, the disruption that took place during the COVID-19 pandemic, and in many of our parishes the support of deacons and the lay faithful leading prayers in homes, at the graveside and crematorium. In light of the demands being placed on a smaller number of priests we can anticipate that in each of the 86 parishes of the Diocese of Down and Connor there will be a need for more lay people to be trained and to provide prayerful support by leading prayer in our own communities to support the bereaved.

This resource booklet is provided across each of our parishes to help families reflect on the funeral liturgies. It can be used to support you in thinking and preparing for your own funeral and it can be an aid for prayer and preparation of a funeral following the death of a loved one.

Each day those who have died are remembered at every Mass, as are those who mourn. Let us take comfort in these prayers and in the certain hope that for the Lord's faithful, in death, life is changed not ended.

*+Alan Mc Guckian SJ.*

+Alan Mc Guckian SJ Bishop of Down and Connor  
November 2024

# When a Loved One Dies

The death of a family member is a very difficult time for the family. No matter how prepared we think we may be, when a loved one dies there is always shock. When a loved one dies, the first thing to do is nothing. Don't panic. Take a deep breath and take as much time as you need to come to terms with the death.

When you (or someone with you) are ready, begin to reach out to key family members or friends who are not present, just one or two; let the word spread gently. If the local priest has not been called before the person died, contact him now and ask him or a parish representative [1] to come out to pray with the family. Contact the doctor and ask him or her to call out to certify the death. Make contact with the Funeral Director. Take things at your own pace. There is no need to rush.

Over the next few hours there will be things to do. The Funeral Director will guide you. It will seem like a lot and can be overwhelming, but there is time. Take the time you need, and don't be afraid to ask others to help.

God be with you at this time.



“He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High and abides in the shade of the Almighty says to the Lord: ‘My refuge, my stronghold, my God in whom I trust!’”

Psalm 90: 1-2

[1] This person could be a member of the Parish Bethany Bereavement Group or Parish Funeral Ministry Team.

*Heavenly Father, today we find ourselves in a time of grief, shock and sadness at the death of our loved one. We pray that you give us the strength, with the comfort and support of family and friends, to make the necessary arrangements to lay our loved one to rest. May we hold on to the promise that you have prepared a place for them in your heavenly kingdom. Amen*

# Explaining Death

Death is an inevitability for all of us and grief is the natural consequence of death. Some people find comfort in the realisation that whilst the loved one has died, the love they shared has not died. In his first letter to the Corinthians, St Paul gives us a wonderful description of what love is but the most important descriptor comes at the end of the passage when he tells us that love never comes to an end.

The knowledge that I have now is imperfect;  
but then I shall know as fully as I am known.

In short, there are three things that last: faith, hope and love;  
and the greatest of these is love.”

(1 Cor 13:12-13)

When someone we love dies, we face dealing with a whole variety of reactions – feelings, physical sensations, behaviours, thoughts. Central to finding a way through our feelings of grief is making time to talk to someone we trust. Participation in the funeral and wake may assist us in accepting the reality of the death and finding some comfort.

**Children** are often excluded from the rituals and practices around death and dying in the mistaken belief that they are too young to grieve, it might be too upsetting for them or that the funeral is no place for a child. If mature adults need the rituals, then surely children need rituals to help them express their grief. If they wish, allow children to be present at the wake; to see the body; to be at and if possible be involved in the funeral.

Children’s understanding of death will vary according to their level of development, cognitively and emotionally. For example, children under the age of 8 or 9 may not understand the permanence of death.

They may have seen a cartoon character flattened by a steam roller and then be up running around again; or heard someone say that the phone is dead but later on it’s not.

Children tend to be quite literal in their interpretation of information, so it’s important to be as honest and clear as possible when explaining death to them. To say that Granny fell asleep and went up to heaven may lead the child to be afraid to go to sleep in case God takes them to heaven too. The level of their language development will impact on their ability to verbalise their feelings. They may find help through art; play; by creating memory boxes or books. Looking at photographs to stimulate conversation may also be of help.



“Do not let your hearts  
be troubled.  
Trust in God still, and  
trust in me.  
There are many rooms  
in my Father’s house;”

John 14:1-2

# Explaining Death

Explaining that someone has died to a person with learning disabilities can be very daunting and instinctively we want to spare the person any pain, but getting upset is natural and people with learning disabilities should be allowed to get upset and to express their grief.

When explaining death, it is important to use appropriate language - use the words 'dead', 'died' or 'dying' rather than phrases such as 'we have lost' or 'has passed on' as these can cause confusion and inhibit understanding. Depending on the person's communication skills, you may need to use signs, symbols or pictures to help them to comprehend. After explaining that a loved one has died, you should check that the individual has understood and is clear about what this means. It may be helpful to go through a 'social story' or script to give the person a clear picture of what is going to happen next, and to help them to cope with the funeral and any changes that might occur following the bereavement.

We often make assumptions about what is best for the person with a learning disability, but it is crucial to ask them what they want to do when it comes to seeing the person who has died or attending the wake and the funeral. If possible, involve the person in making decisions and planning - choosing the flowers, etc.

Provide any assistance that they might need during the grieving process and remember to ask for help if you need it. There are resources available that you may find useful when supporting someone with learning disabilities to deal with bereavement, including 'Easy Read' guides for explaining death. [2]



“Happy the pure in heart: they shall see God.”

Matthew 5:8

[2] Cruse Bereavement Care, *Somewhere to turn to when someone dies*.

*Heavenly Father, we thank you for the life of of our loved one and the love and legacy they left behind. Be with us during this time of loss and bereavement. Help us to find the right words to express their departure from this life in a way that can bring comfort and understanding to all affected by their death. We pray that those who have gone before us have entered their eternal reward as sons and daughters of the Living God. Amen*

# Gathering in the Presence of the Body

## Arrival at home

The gathering of the family when the body of the deceased is brought home is acknowledged by the Church as a very special time. This is known as *Gathering in the Presence of the Body* and is a short time of prayer.

Following this, family and friends may gather again on the evening before the funeral for the *Vigil For The Deceased*. This prayer service may be celebrated in the home of the deceased, in the funeral home or mortuary chapel. In some cases, the family may wish to remove the body of their loved one to the church on the evening before the funeral when the body is received with a specific rite of reception.

## During the wake

Families are encouraged to pray together during the wake. Traditionally, the rosary or even a decade of the rosary could be recited by a lay person. All these times of prayer may be led by a Priest, a Deacon or a Lay Funeral Minister. Where possible, a time will be agreed with the family so that as many as possible may attend these prayers. This would especially be the case when the body is received into the church on the evening prior to the funeral.

After the person has died, the arrangements for the funeral followed by the burial or cremation will normally have been agreed between the family, the parish and the Funeral Director. Provided the next of kin are not too distressed, a conversation may begin, after one of the prayers, regarding the details of the actual funeral.

The family will be helped regarding the choice of readings, short prayers of intercession (Prayer of the Faithful) and sacred music. Depending on the timescales, the minister will normally call back the following day to get the family's final choice on these matters.



“The Lord tells us to be prepared for the encounter, death is an encounter: it is He who comes to visit us, it is He who comes to take us by the hand and take us with Him.”

His Holiness, Pope Francis  
During celebration of the mass at  
the Casa Santa Marta, 29 Nov. 2019

*Merciful Jesus, as we welcome the body of our loved one, surround our family and friends with your comfort and peace. Let us not be overwhelmed at this time of sadness and grief, rather give us the strength and grace we will need in the coming days. May our prayers in union with God and all the saints in glory help bring those who have died to the joy of heaven. Amen*



# The Funeral Liturgy - Celebration of Mass or a Liturgy of the Word

The purpose of the Catholic Funeral Liturgy is to offer praise and thanksgiving to God, to pray for the deceased, and to offer prayerful support to the bereaved family.

The **Requiem Mass**, or Funeral Mass, is the central liturgical celebration for the deceased. It is similar in structure to a Sunday Mass, with readings, responsorial psalm, homily, Prayer of the Faithful and distribution of Holy Communion. In the Catholic tradition, a Requiem Mass was the only form of funeral rite that people were familiar with, but there are equally valid alternatives.

A Celebration of the Liturgy of the Word, i.e. a service of readings and prayers only, may be suitable in some circumstances, and may be held in the church. There are readings from the Hebrew Scriptures (Old Testament) and the New Testament, a homily, Prayer of the Faithful and prayers of final commendation. A Priest or Deacon or a Lay Funeral Minister may lead the Liturgy of the Word. Music suitable for a Funeral Liturgy should always be drawn from the wide range of Catholic Christian music and song.

Sometimes families request a **Prayer Service** at the home of the deceased or at the chapel of rest in the funeral home followed immediately by the Rite of Committal at the graveside or the crematorium. It may be that the family circle is very small, or perhaps the family are not regular Mass-goers, and they feel this may be more appropriate.

There is also the option to simply gather at the graveside or crematorium and have a Rite of Committal there. The local Priest will always advise and assist the bereaved family in choosing a type of funeral which best meets their needs, and within reason will do his utmost to accommodate them.



“Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.”

Matthew 24:35

*Lord God, we thank you for being a compassionate God who walks with us during times of suffering and loss. May we treasure the life and memories of those special people we have known and loved. We thank you for the love and support shown to us by so many during this time of planning and service as we say our final goodbyes. May the soul of our loved one enter into your presence and may we be comforted by the message of hope found in the resurrection of Jesus at this time of grief. Amen*

# Rite of Committal

After a Requiem Mass or Liturgy of the Word or Prayer Service, the body of the deceased will be brought to a cemetery for burial or to a crematorium. There, at the graveside or in the crematorium, the Rite of Committal takes place.

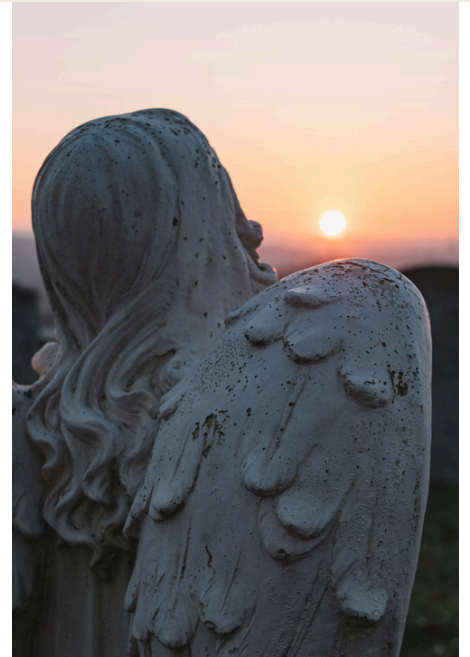
## The Rite of Committal at the Graveside

When the funeral procession arrives at the place of burial, the coffin will be lowered into the ground and the funeral minister extends an invitation to pray for the deceased and for those who mourn. A few lines of scripture are read followed by a prayer over the place of committal. The coffin is then sprinkled with Holy Water and scattered with earth. Prayers of intercession are then offered, followed by the Lord's Prayer. The rite ends with a prayer and the dismissal of those gathered. The Hail Mary may also be included and an appropriate piece of music may be played to conclude the rite.

## The Rite of Committal at the Crematorium

The Rite of Committal at a crematorium follows closely the committal at a graveside. The coffin is placed on a dais upon arrival and then the funeral minister extends an invitation to pray for the deceased and for those who mourn. A few lines of scripture are read followed by a prayer over the place of committal. The coffin is then sprinkled with Holy Water before it is lowered from sight or curtains are drawn around it.

If requested, an opportunity can be provided at the Rite of Committal for someone close to the family to offer a brief, charitable tribute to the deceased or to offer a word of thanks to those who have helped and supported the family in their bereavement. When a body is cremated, it is recommended that there may be a further brief service, perhaps as soon as possible, for the burial of the ashes. The Church does not permit the scattering of ashes. The Church teaches that the bodies of the baptised should be treated with reverence and respect and if possible buried in consecrated ground.



"Resurrectio Domini,  
spes nostra - the  
resurrection of the  
Lord is our hope."

St Augustine

*God, Our Father, help us to recognise that death is not the end, but a path to eternal life. May we be consoled by the promise that salvation was opened up for the whole of humankind through the saving events of Jesus' life; His Passion, Death, Resurrection and Ascension into Heaven. We place before you in confidence our loved one who will be laid to rest and entrust them into your heavenly care. Amen*

# Ministry of Consolation

After the funeral, there is a tradition of continued prayers for the deceased, especially through the celebration of a *Month's Mind Mass* and an *Anniversary Mass*. This helps with the grieving process and it is a way to continue commending the soul of the deceased to God's loving mercy. It is also a time to come together to pray, remember and thank God for the life of a loved one.

The *Month's Mind Mass* is offered around four weeks after the funeral and can be organised through the parish office. It also is good to have a Mass celebrated each year on the anniversary of a loved one's death, or during the month of the Holy Souls in November or around the time of Cemetery Sunday. This is a good, uplifting and prayerful way of remembrance.

Graves are sacred spaces. To show love and respect, it is appropriate to place flowers or potted plants on a grave and keep it tidy. The annual Cemetery Sunday, when graves are blessed, is a good time to visit, pray and tend the burial plot.

Bethany Bereavement provide a voluntary community and parish based ministry of listening and accompaniment to the bereaved which aims to help adults to journey through their grief. For more information contact your parish or the Pathways to the future Office.

Contact: [pathwaystothefuture@downandconnor.org](mailto:pathwaystothefuture@downandconnor.org)

Parishes may have other similar bereavement support groups.



“Happy those who  
mourn: they shall be  
comforted.”

Matthew 5:4

*Lord, may your Holy Spirit open our hearts to receive your gifts of hope, direction and courage. We give you thanks for all who continue to love and support us through our grief. May we now live our lives treasuring the memories of those we have known and loved. Eternal rest grant unto them O Lord and let perpetual light shine upon them. May they rest in peace. May their souls and the souls of all the faithful departed through the mercy of God, rest in peace. Amen.*

# Funeral Guidance for Families

## The Parish Priest

The Parish Priest will usually be the main point of contact for families at the time of death of a loved one. He provides empathy and support and can explain aspects of our Catholic faith. He will confirm the funeral arrangements and celebrate the Funeral Mass.

## The Deacon

A Deacon, as an ordained Minister of the Church, may preside at funeral rites, though he cannot celebrate a Requiem Mass.

## The Role of the Lay Minister

Many parishes will have a team of lay volunteers who will assist and support the Parish Priest with aspects of the Funeral Rites.

When a Lay Minister has undergone appropriate formation and has been formally commissioned by the Diocese, he or she may assist by

- Visiting the family.
- Sharing information about the various funeral rites.
- Leading prayer in the family home or funeral home.
- Leading committal prayers at the graveside or crematorium.

In the absence of a Priest or Deacon, the Lay Minister may lead a Funeral Service when Mass is not celebrated. A Lay Funeral Minister may assist in his or her own parish, or within neighbouring parishes as and when needed.

## Selection of Readings

The Priest, Deacon, and/or Lay Minister will help family members to choose from an appropriate selection of approved scripture readings. We believe that God speaks to us through these texts, and they help us to know Christ himself, who passed through death to new life. It is very important that those chosen to read are able to do so with clarity and reverence. Families may choose readers from their family circle who have experience of reading publicly or at Mass, or if necessary the priest can choose a reader from the parish.



“Whenever possible, ministers should involve the family in planning the funeral rites: in the choice of the texts and rites provided in the ritual, in the selection of music for the rites, and in the designation of liturgical ministers.”

Order of Christian Funerals  
General Introduction (17)

# Funeral Guidance for Families

## Selection of Music and Hymns

Music is integral to the funeral rites, allowing the community to express emotions that words alone may fail to convey. Ministers and church musicians will help families choose suitable hymns and psalms. The texts of the hymns chosen should express the paschal mystery of the Lord's suffering, death and triumph over death.

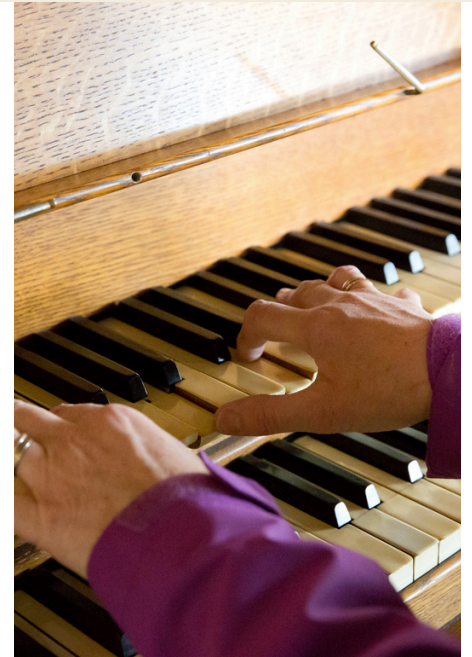
It is also important that the congregation is able to participate as much as possible. Secular music must not replace the sacred music which is part of the Rite. Families are reminded that the Diocese does not have a Streaming Licence to cover the playing of secular music or songs in church buildings.

Very often, families will want to express their love and appreciation of the deceased. It is important to remember that a eulogy or words of appreciation are not part of the Catholic Funeral Rite. It is customary for the Priest or Deacon to incorporate family memories into the homily.

*Sometimes a member of the family would wish to speak personally about the deceased. This is best done, and will be more personal, at the intimate gathering for family and friends after the funeral. It could also take place at the cemetery/crematorium. [9]*

The tribute should be brief, no more than five minutes, and spoken by one family member. It should be written out and shared with the Priest, Deacon or Lay Minister beforehand. The words should express appreciation for the life of the deceased, and gratitude to carers or medical staff and the wider community. The words can also take the form of a prayer, or reflection which is appropriate to the setting.

[9] Taken from The Diocesan Liturgy Commission for the Diocese of Down and Connor Copyright 2012.



“The music at funerals should support, console and uplift the participants and help create in them a spirit of hope in Christ’s victory over death.”

Order of Christian Funerals  
General Introduction (31)

# Funeral Guidance for Families

## Family Mementoes and Photographs

Families may wish to incorporate symbols of the life of the deceased into the Funeral. These may include photographs and mementoes and religious symbols such as rosary beads, prayer book and bible. These items may be displayed in an appropriate and dignified way, perhaps on a small table at the front of the church, alongside the coffin. They should be placed on display before the start of the Funeral Mass or Service. They should not form part of the Procession of the Gifts.

## Flags and Emblems

The Order of Christian Funerals (General Introduction #38) states that national flags, political emblems and other insignia have no place in the funeral liturgy. In society, it is also seen as a sign of disrespect for the national flag to be covered and so it is the policy of the Diocese of Down and Connor that these symbols should be removed. Some parishes may use the Pall. The Pall is a large white cloth which is draped over the coffin and is a sign and reminder of the white garment a person receives at the time of their Baptism and the promise of eternal life to come through Christ. The Pall is a sign of the sacred dignity of the deceased.

## Fees and Expenses

The Funeral Director will normally advise families on the various fees and expenses associated with planning a funeral, including the services of professional musicians and singers. Families may wish to make a voluntary donation to the Parish. It is customary to make an offering to the Priest or Deacon who has attended the family and celebrated the funeral liturgy. Sacristans and Lay Ministers are also permitted to accept gratuities.



“The Liturgy is a radiant expression of the Paschal Mystery in which Christ draws us to himself and calls us to communion.”

Pope Benedict XVI  
Sacramentum Caritatis

# Preparation of your own Funeral

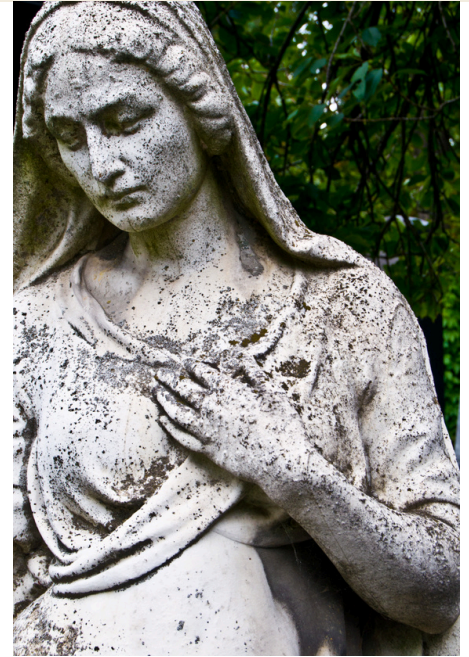
If you've ever had to arrange a funeral for someone, you'll know just how much there is to decide and how difficult it can be to make the right choice for your loved one.

Taking time to sit and talk with your family or a funeral director about your wishes for your own funeral will be helpful for your loved ones in the future. It can be comforting and reassuring to have your own funeral arrangements in place and you may wish to consider having a pre-paid funeral plan.

Here are some questions to consider:

- How would you like to be dressed?
- Would you like to repose at home or a funeral home?
- Would you like to remain at home or brought to the church in the days prior to the funeral?
- Are there any Readings and Hymns that have particular meaning for you?
- Where would you like to be buried? If you would prefer a cremation, where would you like your ashes to be interred?
- Have you decided on a choice of coffin or urn if required?
- Have you made arrangements to cover funeral expenses?

For further information and for help with any aspect of funeral planning, contact your local funeral director.



“I am going now to prepare a place for you, and after I have gone and prepared you a place, I shall return to take you with me; so that where I am you may be too.”

John 14:3

*‘Pray for one another and, in order to be able to open the door with trust and confidence when the moment comes, pray to God saying, “Lord, prepare my heart to die well, to die in peace, to die with hope.”’*

*His Holiness, Pope Francis*

## Prayers When a Loved One Dies

### A prayer for those who mourn the death of a child

O Lord, whose ways are beyond understanding,  
listen to the prayers of your faithful people:  
that those weighed down by grief  
at the loss of this little child  
may find reassurance in your infinite goodness.  
Through Christ our Lord.  
Amen.

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### Saint Patrick's Breastplate

Christ with me, Christ before me,  
Christ behind me, Christ within me,  
Christ below me, Christ above me,  
Christ on my right hand, Christ on my left hand,  
Christ in my sleeping, Christ in my waking,  
Christ in the heart of all who think of me,  
Christ in the mouth of all who speak to me,  
Christ in every eye that looks at me,  
Christ in Every ear that listens to me.

### Cardinal Newman's Prayer

May the Lord support us all the day long,  
till the shades lengthen and the evening comes,  
and the busy world is hushed, and the fever of life is over,  
and our work is done. Then in his mercy may he give us a safe lodging,  
and holy rest, and peace at the last.  
Amen.

### Adapted from the Order of Christian Funerals

#### 2022 Reprint

Lord Jesus our Redeemer, you willingly gave yourself up to death, so  
that all might be saved and pass from death to life. We humbly ask you  
to comfort your servants in their grief and to receive (Name) into the arms of  
your mercy.

You alone are the Holy One, you are mercy itself; by dying you unlocked  
the gates of life for those who believe in you. Forgive (Name) his/her  
sins, and grant him/her a place of happiness, light and peace in the  
kingdom of your glory forever. Amen





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## Helpful Resources

**The Celebration of Life** -The priest will provide families with a booklet ‘**The Celebration of Life**’ to help with preparations for the funeral Mass. The readings and Responsorial Psalms included in ‘Choosing the Readings’ in that booklet are taken from Masses for the Dead, pages 849-890 of Lectionary III.

**Bethany Bereavement Ministry** - Is a voluntary parish-based ministry which aims to help adults to journey through their grief. Bereavement support through Bethany Groups is available through the Down and Connor Pathways to the Future Office.

Contact: [pathwaystothefuture@downandconnor.org](mailto:pathwaystothefuture@downandconnor.org)

Tele no: 02890690920

**Cruse Bereavement Care** - A national charity which offers support, advice and information to people of all ages when someone dies.

Contact: <http://www.cruse.org.uk/northern-ireland>

Tele no: 0808 808 1677

**To Bring Comfort and Consolation, Bereavement Ministry: Paddy Shannon** - A selection of prose, poems and prayers. This book is directed primarily to those involved in bereavement ministry.

**A Celebration of Life, When A Loved One Dies: Redemptorist Communications** - This book offers practical advice on what to do when a loved one dies. [www.redcoms.org](http://www.redcoms.org)

The scripture quotations in the Lectionary volumes currently in use in Ireland are taken from the Jerusalem Bible version of the Scriptures, copyrighted © in 1966 and 1968 by Darton, Longman and Todd Ltd and Doubleday and Company, Inc. and used by permission. The version of the Psalms used for the Responsorial Psalms is that translated from the Hebrew by the Grail, © the Grail, England 1963, and published by Collins in Fontana Books, London, 1963. It is used by permission.

Quotations of His Holiness Pope Francis and Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI are taken from <https://www.vaticannews.va/>







[www.pathwaystothefuture.org](http://www.pathwaystothefuture.org)

This booklet was prepared by the Pathways to the Future Team.  
Diocese of Down and Connor



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