

A Cistercian Funeral by Steve Distefano

Cistercians take the idea of "community" seriously. Just as their lives have been developed through their interactions with brother monks, the journey toward God through death involves the support of the entire community.

When a member of the Cistercian family is ill, if at all possible, they are cared for at the abbey infirmary.* The monks assigned to be infirmarians take care of feeding, bathing, and administering simple medications. Each infirmarian is on-call for a 24-hour rotation. It is important to note that these infirmarians do not necessarily have medical skills. They are simply "members of the Cistercian family" who care for their brother. (*As needed, monks are sent to local hospitals as medically necessary.)

If a brother is very near death, the Abbot may post a sheet on which his brothers may sign up to take turns in order to with the dying brother at all times and offer prayers or words of comfort. The sense of hospitality and community is visibly present by brother monks who share their time and companionship even in this difficult hour. Their brother is not alone in his journey. Also, their help allows the infirmarian to attend to the needs of other brothers who are ill.

When a brother is dying, the community gathers for prayer around the bedside of the dying monk. The Abbot administers the Sacrament of the Sick. The understanding is that this beloved brother is now entering the depth of the Sacred Mystery -- and is going home at last to see his Lord and God. *(A lit paschal candle is place at the foot of his bed as a sign of this.)*

After the brother dies, the mortician is called to take the body. The mortician embalms the body and puts the habit and cowl on the body. After this is done, the body is brought back to the Abbey for burial.

When the body has been returned to the Abbey, the body is then placed in an open pine box (coffin). There are 3 large straps under the body which will be used later for lowering the body into the grave. The open coffin is carried through the cloister, led by the Pascal Candle – the symbol of the Risen Christ. Brothers line the hallways of the cloister. As body is carried by, each brother joins the procession. The procession leads to the church – and the body is placed between the choir stalls (so that the body is present at any Office that is chanted during this time.) A short prayer is said as the body is placed in the church. The Pascal Candle is placed at the deceased monk's feet, and two small lamps are placed near the open coffin so that monks will be able to read at night. Chairs are set on either side of the Psalter for the brother monks who will take turns praying.)

For the next 24 hours – or until the funeral mass -- two brothers will sit next to the body as it lies in the simple open-box coffin in the church. The brothers take turns reciting Psalms throughout the night, so someone is with the body at all times.

After 24 hours or so *(At the time of the funeral mass)* , the body is carried to the

sanctuary of the church.. The presider of the funeral mass is usually the Abbot, and the entire community is present. At the end of the funeral mass, the body is carried out to the Abbey graveyard in a procession with the brother monks. Prayers are offered in thanks for the brother's life -- and to ask God to take the soul of this brother to God's everlasting Kingdom in heaven. The body is blessed with incense. The open coffin is placed next to the grave. (The grave has already been dug by a brother using a tractor.) A long ladder is lowered into the grave, and one of the infirmarians climbs down into the grave in order to receive the body. When the infirmarian is safely in the grave, the ladder is removed. Six monks (3 on each side of the body) grab the straps underneath the body and position the body over the open grave and gently lower the body to the infirmarian. The infirmarian lowers the body to pine branches that have been spread on the bottom of the grave. The infirmarian then places a simple violet cloth over the face of the monk. After the infirmarian is finished, the ladder is lowered, and he climbs out. The Abbot offers prayers and makes a sign of the cross with earth. The community of monks offer prayers and chants in offering for the soul of their departed brother. The final chant is sung – “Christ is Risen from the dead – Alleluia, Alleluia, Alleluia” and the community of monks begin to shovel some of the dirt into the grave. *(When enough dirt has covered the body, the Abbot gives a sign to stop and then he says a final prayer that concludes the burial service. After everyone has walked away, monks completely shovel the rest of the dirt into the grave.)*

At this point, the service is finished, and everyone walks away. Other monks then come and completely shovel the rest of the dirt into the grave.

The final marker for the grave is a simple white cross listing the Brothers name as he was known in religious life, and the date that he died.

The funeral of a Cistercian monk is a very powerful event to witness. In life – and in death – the Cistercian community expresses the hope in Christ. While quite simple, it is profound in its witness of a life dedicated to God Alone. The community that has lived and worked with a brother is still mystically united to him in Christ in the Communion of Saints. The brother now rests with God.