

Liturgy of the Word: Celebration of Life for an Animal Companion

PURPOSE

A good goodbye can greatly aid in healing. The purpose of this Liturgy of the Word is to celebrate the life of a pet that has to be euthanized. This service enfolds the act of euthanasia in deep prayer, honoring the gift of the life that has been given, and acknowledging the loss of companionship in your life.

SPECIAL FEATURES

This liturgy has three special features:

- The Shared Reflection is the opportunity for each person to share a memory or story about the animal companion, and to reflect on what the animal means to them.
- The Passing Home to God Ritual is the euthanasia of the animal, performed by a professional veterinarian.
- The Poem of Consolation offers words of healing after your animal has passed away.

PARTICIPANTS

Invite family and friends who know your family and animal companion well. Determine whether your children are old enough to participate in such a prayer service and witness euthanasia. Refrain from inviting anyone who may not embrace the gravity of losing an animal companion.

LOCATION

This liturgy is designed to be done in the home with a licensed veterinarian. It can be modified for a veterinarian's office or another location, like a park.

POSSIBLE MODIFICATIONS

1. As with any Leaping Liturgy, you are free to modify the language or rituals to better suit your needs.
2. If you cannot find a vet to euthanize in your home, consider inquiring whether you may hold the liturgy at the vet's office. Find out if (1) it will be quiet enough for prayer, and (2) you will have the time needed to do the liturgy prayerfully (at least 30 minutes). The vet does not need to be present for the entirety of the service but can enter the room at the Passing Home to God Ritual.
3. It is recommended that the euthanasia remain part of the liturgy. However, if this is not possible or wise (i.e., you can't find a vet to come to your home, your children are too young, etc.), you can (1) pray the liturgy at home and omit the Passing Home to God Ritual, or (2) pray the liturgy at home but save the Passing Home to God Ritual to pray at the vet's office.
4. This liturgy assumes your pet's remains are taken to your vet's car who will have them cremated. As written, the liturgy concludes and then the body is carried to the car. However, if weather permits and it is appropriate, you can ritually carry your animal's remains to the car after the song is played (page 12). Once the body is reverently placed in the car, continue with the service and conclude the liturgy at the car.

ADDITIONAL NOTES

- This liturgy assumes familiarity with the Catholic Mass.
- To create a prayerful and moving service, read the preparatory notes and script thoroughly. Allow ample time to prepare.
- Instructions throughout the script are in red. Send questions to Father Anne at vaticanreject@gmail.com.

- If you received this liturgy from a friend, please consider making a donation at www.fatheranne.com to support this ministry.
- Scripture quotations are from New Revised Standard Version Bible: Catholic Edition, copyright © 1989, 1993 National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved.
- “In Blackwater Woods” is from *American Primitive* by Mary Oliver. Copyright © 1983 by Mary Oliver. Reprinted with the permission of Little, Brown and Company. All rights reserved.

A MESSAGE FROM FATHER ANNE

I am deeply sorry for your loss. One of my ministries is the accompaniment of senior dogs through end of life. I am praying with you and for you as you prepare to let go of your friend. I pray that you have a good goodbye, and that your animal has a smooth transition into the heart of God.

Liturgy of the Word: Celebration of Life for an Animal Companion

ADVANCED PREPARATION CHECKLIST

Day(s) before the liturgy:

- Contact the vet and set a date for the service. Be sure the vet is aware of your desire to hold this prayer service. Obtain their agreement to participate. Ask about animal burial or cremation. This liturgy assumes the vet will take the pet's remains to the appropriate place for cremation.
- Prepare your family and friends for the liturgy. Ask them to prepare a 2-minute reflection about your animal companion. Ask them to consider the following questions: What do they love about this animal? Do they have a funny or tender moment that they would like to share? Explain they will have the chance to speak at the Shared Reflection portion of the service.
- Prepare in a special way any children who will be participating. Make sure they understand what will be happening at the prayer service. If necessary, consult a child therapist for guidance.
- Determine who will be the presider (the main celebrant) of the liturgy. The presider guides the group through the service. A desirable choice for this role is someone comfortable with people and with emotion, and who can set a prayerful and compassionate tone for the celebration.
- Select three (3) readers, one for each piece of scripture—the first reading, the psalm, and the Gospel. Provide each reader with a copy of their assigned passage. Ask them to prayerfully prepare the reading. If they are unfamiliar with reading scripture during a liturgy, suggest that they privately practice proclaiming the passage aloud in a way that gently and prayerfully conveys its meaning.
- Each of these readers will also read one of the Prayers of the Faithful on page 11. Give them a copy of their prayer and explain at which point they will offer it. Ask them to prayerfully prepare the prayer.

- Review the Poem of Consolation on pages 12 and 13. Use this poem or select a consoling poem of your choice. Other possibilities include “When I Die” by Rumi or “Gone from My Sight” by Rev. Luther S. Beecher. Identify someone to read the Poem of Consolation. Provide the reader with a copy of the poem and ask them to prayerfully prepare it. This is an important moment in the service so select someone who will proclaim the poem well.

DAY OF PREPARATION CHECKLIST

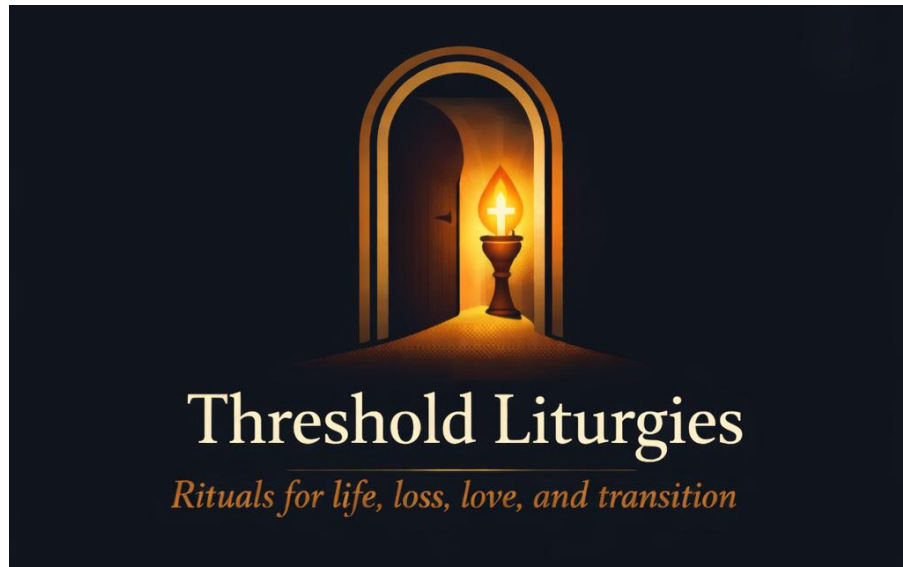
On the day of the liturgy:

- Check in with the vet. Clarify who will take the animal's remains to the location for cremation.
- Gather the following items:
 - Altar space
 - Fabric, flowers, and candles to decorate the altar
 - Lighter
 - Kleenex
 - Pet's objects—toys, leash, collar, blanket, treats, etc.—one object for each person attending
 - Printed script for the presider (pages 7-14)
 - White three-ring binder
 - Printed scripture passages for each reader
 - Printed Prayers of the Faithful for each reader
 - Computer, iPad, or iPhone for playing a song
- Identify a central location where your animal companion can lay comfortably surrounded by family. Place the animal's bed or blanket there.
- Create an altar space nearby this central location. Prayerfully decorate it with fabric, candles and flowers.
- Place your animal's belongings in an easily accessible place. These will be placed on the altar during the Shared Reflection. The altar can remain up after the animal has passed away for as long as you desire.
- Cue the song “Eye Has Not Seen” by Marty Haugen on your computer, phone or iPad. Purchase it on iTunes or find a version you like on YouTube (however, beware of advertisements that disrupt the prayerful atmosphere).

- Put the printed script in the binder for ease of use. Give the presider the copy of the binder with the script. Ask if the presider would like any water for the service.
- Give each reader a copy of their scripture passage and their prayer. Give a copy of the Poem of Consolation to the selected reader. Remind them at which points they will be participating.

AT THE START

- When you are set to begin, place your animal companion in the space you have prepared. Remove any collars or uncomfortable items from the animal's body so they can pass away comfortably.
- Signal the presider to welcome everyone:
 - Thank people for coming
 - Give a brief overview of the service
 - Briefly explain the Shared Reflection and the Passing Home to God Ritual
- Introduce the vet. Ask them to explain the euthanasia process. Be sure the vet notes the rate at which death occurs (almost immediate). Have the vet answer any questions.
- When ready to proceed, the presider signifies the start of the service by lighting the candles on the altar and silently invites the Spirit to be present.
- The presider holds several long moments of silence, then invites everyone to stand.



Liturgy of the Word: Celebration of Life for an Animal Companion

OPENING PRAYER *(Presider)*

Assembly stands.

Let us begin our prayer in the name of the Father,
and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

(All bless themselves with the sign of the cross.)

The Lord be with you.

-- *(All answer) And with your spirit.*

Today we gather as a family to celebrate the life of *[animal's name]*.
She/he has given us joy and affection, has made us laugh, and has
taught us about fidelity and love. She/he has showed us forgiveness,
and revealed the gift of loyal companionship. *(pause)*

Together, we have made a family. *(pause)*

Now the time has come to thank God for *[animal's name]* life, and
to say goodbye to her/him as she/he returns to the heart of God.

PENITENTIAL RITE *(Presider)*

As we ready our hearts for this celebration of life,
let us take a moment to praise our loving and merciful God.

Lord Jesus, you are the source of all goodness.
Lord, have mercy.

-- *(All answer) Lord, have mercy.*

Christ Jesus, you listen deeply to our needs and desires.
Christ, have mercy.

-- *(All answer) Christ, have mercy.*

Lord Jesus, you pour out your endless gifts of companionship and
fidelity. Lord, have mercy.

-- *(All answer) Lord, have mercy.*

COLLECT *(Presider)*

Let us pray: *(pause)*

O God, you give us the opportunity to love in this life.
We gather together to remember the many ways
that *[animal's name]* has blessed us.
We ask now that you send forth your Spirit
to accompany us as we say goodbye
to this one we love so dearly.

Through our Lord Jesus Christ, your Son,
who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God for ever and ever.

-- *(All answer) Amen.*

Assembly is seated.

FIRST READING: ECCLESIASTES 3:1-8 *(Reader 1)*

A reading from the book of Ecclesiastes

For everything there is a season,
and a time for every matter under heaven:
a time to be born, and a time to die;
a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is planted;
a time to kill, and a time to heal;
a time to break down, and a time to build up;
a time to weep, and a time to laugh;

a time to mourn, and a time to dance;
a time to throw away stones, and a time to gather stones together;
a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing;
a time to seek, and a time to lose;
a time to keep, and a time to throw away;
a time to tear, and a time to sew;
a time to keep silence, and a time to speak;
a time to love, and a time to hate;
a time for war, and a time for peace.

The Word of the Lord.

-- *(All answer)* Thanks be to God.

PSALM 130:1-7 *(Reader 2)*

Hope in the Lord, for with the Lord there is steadfast love,
and great power to redeem.

-- *(All repeat)* Hope in the Lord, for with the Lord
there is steadfast love and great power to redeem.

Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord.

Lord, hear my voice!

Let your ears be attentive
to the voice of my supplications!

-- *(All repeat)* Hope in the Lord, for with the Lord
there is steadfast love and great power to redeem.

If you, O Lord, should mark iniquities,

Lord, who could stand?

But there is forgiveness with you,
so that you may be revered.

-- *(All repeat)* Hope in the Lord, for with the Lord
there is steadfast love and great power to redeem.

I wait for the Lord, my soul waits,

and in his word I hope;

my soul waits for the Lord

more than those who watch for the morning,
more than those who watch for the morning.

-- *(All repeat)* Hope in the Lord, for with the Lord
there is steadfast love and great power to redeem.

GOSPEL: JOHN 14:1-3 *(Reader 3)*

Assembly stands.

A reading from the Holy Gospel according to John

-- *(All answer) Glory to you, O Lord.*

(All trace cross on forehead, lips and heart.)

Do not let your hearts be troubled.

Believe in God, believe also in me.

In my Father's house there are many dwelling places.

If it were not so, would I have told you

that I go to prepare a place for you?

And if I go and prepare a place for you,

I will come again and will take you to myself,

so that where I am, there you may be also.

The Gospel of the Lord.

-- *(All answer) Praise to you, Lord Jesus Christ.*

Assembly sits.

SHARED REFLECTION *(Presider)*

God has a dwelling place for all God's creatures. Before *[animal's name]* returns to God, let us give gratitude to God for the blessing that she/he has been in our lives. I invite each of you to share what *[animal's name]* means to you and how he/she has impacted your life.

During or after your sharing, select one of *[animal's name]'s* objects and place it on the altar. These objects will remain symbols of our deep love for her/him after she/he is gone.

Who would like to start?

People can share in a circle or let each person speak when moved. Give ample time for everyone to share and allow silence and space between sharing. Make sure all who want it have the opportunity to speak.

If necessary, remind people to take an object and place it on the altar. If desired, the altar can remain for days, weeks or months after the animal's death as a sign of honoring.

PRAYERS OF THE FAITHFUL

(Presider) Thank you for remembering how *[animal's name]* has blessed us. Now let us stand and bring our prayers before God.

Assembly stands.

(Reader 1) We pray in Thanksgiving for *[animal's name]*, for how the Spirit has poured through her/him, for the years of joy and companionship, for the gift she/he has been to our family. In gratitude for the opportunity to share life with *[animal's name]*, we pray to the Lord.

-- *(All answer)* Lord, hear our prayer.

(Reader 2) We pray for *[animal's name]*, that she/he feels our profound love for her/him now. We ask that God surround her/him with light and peace as she/he transitions back into God's loving arms. We pray to the Lord.

-- *(All answer)* Lord, hear our prayer.

(Reader 3) For all the animals that roam creation: that humanity may learn to respect and recognize the unique holiness present within them, and respect God's desire for them to be treated with dignity and care. We pray to the Lord.

-- *(All answer)* Lord, hear our prayer.

(Presider) For our family as we say goodbye to *[animal's name]*, that God may comfort us in our time of mourning and always remind us of the joy she/he has given us. We pray to the Lord.

-- *(All answer)* Lord, hear our prayer.

OUR FATHER *(Presider)*

God of Mercy, you have promised to be with us in times of need. We have lifted up our prayers to you in trust and confidence. Now, we pray the prayer that Jesus left us. *Join hands. Singing this prayer is encouraged.*

(All) Our Father, Who art in Heaven,
hallowed be Thy name;
Thy Kingdom come,
Thy will be done
on earth as it is in Heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread;
and forgive us our trespasses
as we forgive those who trespass against us;
and lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from evil.
Amen.

PASSING HOME TO GOD RITUAL (*Presider*)

Loving God, we now present *[animal's name]* back to you. She/he has enriched our lives beyond measure. Thank you for the opportunity to share a life of love with her/him. We now pray for her/his smooth transition into your heart. (*pause*)

Come forward to make the sign of the cross on *[animal's name]*'s forehead. *Each person draws the sign of the cross on the animal's forehead.*

[Vet's name] will now perform the end-of-life procedure. Please gather around *[animal's name]*.

*The vet performs the euthanasia. As your animal passes away, speak lovingly into their ear and continue to stroke them with care. Once the animal has passed away, sit in prayer and mourning for at least **several minutes** to allow the new reality to set in, and to honor the transition of life that is taking place.*

After these moments of silence, play "Eye Has Not Seen" or a song of your choice to reawaken the assembly's collective heart back into communion with one another and with the Spirit. At the song's conclusion, the presider signals to the reader of the Poem of Consolation to begin.

Note: If you are including the carrying of the remains as part of the ritual, reverently pick up the animal now and carry her/him to the designated car. Once the animal is placed lovingly in the proper place, continue with the Poem of Consolation. Finish out the service at the vehicle.

POEM OF CONSOLATION (*Reader 4*)

In Blackwater Woods by Mary Oliver

Look, the trees
are turning
their own bodies
into pillars

of light,
are giving off the rich
fragrance of cinnamon
and fulfillment,

the long tapers
of cattails

are bursting and floating away over
the blue shoulders

of the ponds,
and every pond,
no matter what its
name is, is

nameless now.
Every year
everything
I have ever learned

in my lifetime
leads back to this: the fires
and the black river of loss
whose other side

is salvation,
whose meaning
none of us will ever know.
To live in this world

you must be able
to do three things:
to love what is mortal;
to hold it

against your bones knowing
your own life depends on it;
and, when the time comes to let it go,
to let it go.

CLOSING PRAYER *(Presider)*

Let us pray: *(pause)*

Holy and ever-living God,
we know you hear us,
and that *[animal's name]* has now returned to you,
embraced fully into the joy of your heart.
Please be with us in our sorrow, mend our broken hearts
as we learn to live without *[animal's name]* in our daily lives.
Give us the grace to move through our grief
And to always remember our beloved companion with joy.
Who lives and reigns for ever and ever.

-- *(All answer) Amen.*

CONCLUDING RITE *(Presider)*

The Lord be with you.

-- *(All answer) And with your spirit.*

May Almighty God bless us
in the name of the Father, and of the Son,
and of the Holy Spirit.

(All sign themselves with the sign of the cross)

-- *(All answer) Amen.*

Let us go forth in thanksgiving,
glorifying the Lord with our lives.

-- *(All answer) Thanks be to God.*

When ready, blow out the candles on the altar. If you have not yet done so, reverently carry the animal's remains to the agreed upon location to be taken for cremation.

+