

The Catholic Church, Burial at Sea and Cremation

It must be understood that while this information was furnished by the National Conference of Catholic Bishops Committee on the Liturgy, there are many different opinions in the Catholic Church, and any Catholic contemplating cremation or burial at sea should seek council with a Priest or spiritual director they trust. Dioceses may establish varying standards and you should consult the diocese in your area. They can be found in the telephone directory and will be very helpful in forming your decision.

Sea Services draws your attention to the portion of this article that states cremation, while permitted by the Church, should occur only where the cremation of the body is the only feasible choice.

Recent events have brought to the forefront questions regarding the practice of the cremation of a body and burial at sea. Diocesan offices for worship might find this an opportune time to renew catechesis on these questions for the benefit of pastors and pastoral ministers. A helpful summary of the Church's teaching on cremation may be found in the 1998 statement of the Bishops' Committee on the Liturgy, "Reflections on the Body, Cremation and Catholic Funeral Rites."

"The Church's belief in the sacredness of the human body and the resurrection of the dead has traditionally found expression in the care taken to prepare the bodies of the deceased for burial."(OCF 411)

"This is the body once washed in baptism, anointed with the oil of salvation, and fed with the bread of life. This is the body whose hands clothed the poor and embraced the sorrowing. Indeed, the human body is so inextricably associated with the human person that it is hard to think of a human person apart from his or her body. Thus, the Church's reverence and care for the body grows out of a reverence and concern for the person whom the Church now commends to the care of God." (OCF 412)

Thus, while "cremation is now permitted, it does not enjoy the same value as burial of the body...The Church clearly prefers and urges that the body of the deceased be present for the funeral rites, since the presence of the human body better expresses the values which the Church affirms in its rites." (OCF 413) However, "when extraordinary circumstances make the cremation of a body the only feasible choice, pastoral sensitivity must be exercised by all who minister to the family of the deceased." (OCF 414)

The rites for burial of the cremated remains of a body may be found in the appendix to the Order of Christian Funerals. This appendix recommends that when cremation is chosen, the body be cremated after the Funeral, thus allowing for the presence of the body at the Funeral Mass. When pastoral circumstances require it, however, cremation and committal may take place even before the Funeral liturgy.

Any catechesis on the subject of cremation should emphasize that "the cremated remains of a body should be treated with the same respect given to the corporeal remains of a human body. This includes the use of a worthy vessel to contain the ashes, the manner in which they are carried, the care and attention to appropriate placement and transport, and the final disposition." (OCF 416)

While cremated remains may be buried in a grave, entombed in a mausoleum or columbarium or even buried at sea, "the practice of scattering cremated remains on the sea, from the air, or on the ground, or keeping cremated remains in the home of a relative or friend of the deceased are not the reverent disposition that the Church requires." (OCF 416) The cremated remains of the body may be properly buried at sea in the urn, coffin or other container in which they have been carried to the place of committal. When a body, or the cremated remains of a body are buried at sea, the Committal prayer found at number 406 § 4 is used:

Lord God, by the power of your Word you stilled the chaos of the primeval seas, you made the raging waters of the Flood subside, and calmed the storm on the sea of Galilee. As we commit the body (earthly remains)

of our brother (sister) N. to the deep, grant him/her peace and tranquility until that day when he/she and all who believe in you will be raised to the glory of new life promised in the waters of baptism. We ask this through Christ our Lord. R. Amen.

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[rkempist@archbalt.org]