

## Cremation: A Better Understanding



From 1886 to 1963 the practice of cremation was forbidden for Roman Catholics around the world. In the spirit of Vatican Council II (1962-1965), the practice was restored in 1963. Nevertheless, over 50 years later, uncertainty regarding cremation remains prevalent.

Yes, Catholics can choose to be cremated. The revised Code of Canon Law (1983) states: *The Church earnestly recommends that the pious custom of burial be retained; but it does not forbid cremation, unless this is chosen for reasons, which are contrary to Christian teaching* (Canon 1176, paragraph 3). Obviously, denial of the Resurrection of the body or an attachment to non-Christian (secular or religious) beliefs would be contrary to Christian teaching.

Going back into Christian history and tradition, the Church has always expressed a preference for full-body burial, whether above-ground or in-ground. The risk taken by Joseph of Arimathea to claim the body of Jesus after his

death on the cross shows the respect Christians have for proper burial of the human body.

God not only created us in our humanity, but also sent his Son to assume our body and our nature. Being made in the image and likeness of God makes our bodies inherently honorable.

The Church does not have difficulty with the process of reducing a human body to its component parts by fire since the body will revert to its simplest elements over time. Cremation becomes problematic due to human attitudes or beliefs that may underlie the choice.

### Why did Christians move away from cremation?

- Faith in the Resurrection of the body
- Reverence for the body as a part of the Body of Christ and a temple of the Holy Spirit
- A strong reaction to persecutors' burning of bodies as a taunt against belief in the Resurrection

### Why can Christians choose cremation?

- Transfer of the remains from a distant place
- Financial, ecological or space considerations
- National or ethnic customs
- Concerns or fears about burial or entombment
- Simple personal preference or a choice made on behalf of another

—Taken from the Archdiocese of Milwaukee Catholic Cemeteries website

### What should one do with the cremains?

The cremated remains of the body should be buried or entombed. The scattering of the cremated remains of the body, or the keeping of them at home, or the dividing of them among various family members, or mixing the cremains of a loved one with the cremains of another is not the reverent disposition the church requires.

Most Catholic cemeteries have grave space or crypt space or niches for the cremated remains of the body. This allows for visitation, memorialization and prayers.

## Cremation and The Order Of Christian Funerals

The practice of cremation has grown and become more commonplace in the United States, and it is often presented as a more affordable alternative to traditional burial. What is often overlooked is the Church's teaching regarding the respect and honor due to the human body. The *Order of Christian Funerals'* Appendix on Cremation states: "Although cremation is now permitted by the Church, 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 those rites" (no. 413).

Ideally, if a family chooses cremation, the cremation would take place at some time after the Funeral Mass, so that there can be an opportunity for the Vigil for the Deceased in the presence of the body (during "visitation" or "viewing" at a church or funeral home). This allows for the appropriate reverence for the sacredness of the body at the Funeral Mass: sprinkling with holy water, the placing of the pall, and honoring it with incense. The Rite of Committal then takes place after cremation. Funeral homes offer several options in this case.

When cremation takes place before the Funeral Mass, and the diocesan bishop permits the presence of cremated remains at the Funeral Mass, the Appendix provides adapted texts for the Sprinkling with Holy Water, the Dismissal for use at the Funeral Mass (or the Funeral Liturgy outside Mass), and the Committal of Cremated Remains. The introduction provides further specific details about how the funeral rites are adapted. In all, the rite notes:

The cremated remains of a body should be treated with the same respect given to the human body from which they come. This includes the use of a worthy vessel to contain the ashes, the manner in which they are carried, and the care and attention to appropriate placement and transport, and the final disposition. The cremated remains should be buried in a grave or entombed in a mausoleum or columbarium. 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. (no. 417)

For some families, the choice of cremation is based on financial hardship, so this choice often means also that there is no plan for committal or burial of the cremated remains. As a means of providing pastoral support and an acceptable respectful solution to the problem of uninterred cremated remains, one diocese offered on All Souls' Day in 2011 an opportunity for any family who desired it the interment of cremated remains. The diocese offered a Mass and committal service at one of its Catholic cemeteries and provided, free of charge, a common vault in a mausoleum for the interment of the cremated remains. The names of the deceased interred there were kept on file, though in this case they were not individually inscribed on the vault. [Note that the Archdiocese of Milwaukee offered this opportunity on All Souls' Day in 2016.]

As cremation is chosen more frequently, there will be many who are unaware of the Church's teaching regarding this practice. It is important for bishops and pastors not only to catechize the faithful, but to collaborate with funeral directors in providing helpful and accurate information to families planning the funeral of loved ones. Offering opportunities to family members for the respectful burial of their loved ones, who were not interred after funeral services and cremation, would give effective witness to the importance of Christian burial and our belief in the resurrection. In all, pastors are encouraged to show pastoral sensitivity, especially to those for whom cremation is the only feasible choice.