

Cremation and Christian Burial

A Catholic Understanding

HONORING THE SACREDNESS
OF HUMAN LIFE

HONORING ONE'S BAPTISM
INTO ETERNAL LIFE

What does the Catholic Church teach about cremation?

- The Church permits cremation provided it does not demonstrate a denial of faith in the resurrection of the body and the immortality of the soul.
- Whether cremated or not, human remains are to be placed in a worthy vessel and buried in a cemetery, entombed in a columbarium— a burial place for cremated remains— or buried at sea.
- If cremation is chosen, the Mass of Christian Burial should occur before the cremation.

What is the basis of the Catholic Church's teaching on cremation?

- The Catholic Church's teaching on cremation begins with the sacredness of all human life and the belief that through Baptism we are destined for eternal life with Jesus Christ.
- Because we are made in the image and likeness of God, we believe that every human being is a sacred gift from God and should be treated with dignity and respect.
- When a loved one dies, we believe that the body, once a vessel of the Holy Spirit, will rise again on the last day. Therefore, in death as in life, the body is to be treated with respect and dignity.

The Body

"The long-standing practice of burying the body of the deceased in a grave or tomb," as was Jesus, "continues to be encouraged as a sign of Christian faith." Our identity and self-consciousness as a human person are expressed in and through the body. Therefore, the Church has always held a preference that at death the body be buried.

"The body which lies in death recalls the deceased's personal story of faith, the past relationships, and the continued spiritual presence of the loved one."^{*}

** This is the body once washed in Baptism, anointed with the oil of salvation, and fed with the bread of life. 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.**

Cremation

While the Catholic Church recognizes and allows cremation, it prefers that the cremation take place after the Mass of Christian burial.

In respect for the human person who has died, the Catholic Church asks that the cremated remains of a loved one be treated with the same dignity as that of a body which has not been cremated.

These are not just ashes; these are the remains of a human person, the earthly dwelling of one filled with God's Spirit. Thus the proper disposition of the body, whether cremated or not, is of great importance.

Funeral Rites with Cremated Remains

“When circumstances prevent the presence of the body at the funeral liturgy...it is appropriate that the cremated remains of the body be present for the full course of the funeral rites...” * as included in the Order of Christian Funerals: the Vigil, the Mass and the Committal. The presence of cremated remains at these rites is at the discretion of the diocesan bishop, a practice that is approved in the Diocese of Erie, PA.

For the Mass of Christian Burial, the cremated remains, contained in a worthy vessel, are placed on a pedestal in the space normally occupied by the coffin. The paschal candle is placed near the pedestal. Cremated remains may be carried reverently in the entrance procession or positioned beforehand.

During the funeral liturgy, the vessel containing the cremated remains is blessed with holy water. Unlike the funeral Mass when a body is present, the vessel is not covered with the white pall.

The Rite of Committal, with burial at the cemetery or columbarium, is celebrated as soon as possible.

** All quotes are from the Statement on Cremation and Corporal Burial, United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1997.*

Respect and Dignity in Death

In summary, if you or your loved one choose cremation, allow for a traditional viewing and gathering of family and friends and celebrate a Mass of Christian burial before cremation if at all possible.

After the cremation of your loved one's body, give that body the dignity of burial in the ground or in a mausoleum. Do not spread the ashes over the ground, take them home with you or divide them up among family members.

Remember that these ashes are the remains of a person created in the image and likeness of God, one who was and is loved by God and one who was and is loved by you. Treat the cremated remains of the body with the same dignity and respect that you would show to an un-cremated body.