

Cremation in the Catholic Church

History of Cremation

The Judaic roots of Christian tradition carried a long-standing prohibition of cremation as a reaction to equally long-standing attempts to annihilate Jewish existence and memory. Cremation was a common practice among Greeks and Romans, at least for the very poor,

While cremation is definitely becoming more and more popular, it is actually something new to Catholic Christian tradition. The early Church retained the Jewish practice of bodily burial and rejected the common pagan Roman practice of cremation. The basis for this rule was simply that God has created each person in His image and likeness, and therefore the body is good and should be returned to the earth at death (Gn 3:19). Moreover, our Lord Himself was buried in the tomb and then rose in glory on Easter. Therefore, Christians buried their dead both out of respect for the body and in anticipation of the resurrection at the Last Judgment. St. Paul reminds us, "The Lord Himself will come down from heaven at the word of command, at the sound of the archangel's voice and God's trumpet; and those who have died in Christ will rise first" (I Thes 4:16).

The Church's stance against cremation was also reinforced by those who mocked the belief in the resurrection of the body. Many of the early martyrs were burned at the stake and then their persecutors scattered their ashes as a sign of contempt for this Christian belief.

After the legalization of Christianity in the 4th century, cremation generally ceased in the Roman Empire. As Christian culture continued to spread, even in those missionary lands, regular bodily burial became the norm, even in cultures that had once practiced cremation. Due to the religious belief of the people, the civil authorities also outlawed cremation: for example Charlemagne made cremation a capital offense in 789. The only exception given to this rule was when there may have been a mass death and the spread of disease threatened.

In the nineteenth century, cremation again arose in Europe due greatly to the Freemasonry movement and the rationalist philosophy which denied any notion of the supernatural or spiritual, particularly the immortality of the soul, the afterlife, and the resurrection of the body. The concern for hygiene and the conservation of land also prompted a revival. Many began to view cremation as an acceptable funeral custom. Nevertheless, largely motivated by the affront to the Catholic faith posed by cremation, the Church officially condemned the practice in 1886.

The practice of the early Church was crystallized in the 1917 Code of Canon Law which strictly forbade cremation except when grave public necessity required rapid disposition of bodies, as in times of plague or natural disaster. The Church went so far as to deny Christian burial rites to anyone choosing cremation. The reforms of the Second Vatican Council touched all areas in the life of the Church, including funeral and burial rites. The first document to be promulgated by Pope Paul VI, after the Council began, stated: "The rite for the burial of the dead should evidence more clearly the paschal character of Christian death; and should correspond more closely to the circumstances and traditions found in various regions." (Sacrosanctum Concilium, #81, December 1963) An instruction of the Holy Office related specifically to cremation modified the Church's position to allow cremation to be requested for any sound reason (Piam et Constantem, May 1963). Only if the request were motivated by denial of Christian dogma, hatred of the Catholic Church or a sectarian spirit, would there be any problem with the Church.

In 1963, the Church clarified this regulation. The Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (then known as the Holy Office) issued an instruction "Piam et Constantem" stating, "The constant pious practice among Christians, of burying the bodies of the faithful departed, has always been the object of solicitude on the part of the Church, shown both by providing it with appropriate rites to express clearly the symbolic and religious significance of burial, and by establishing penalties against those who attacked this salutary practice." The Church permitted cremation in cases of necessity, but prohibited it for anyone who was making a stand against the faith.

The new Code of Canon Law (1983) stipulates, "The Church earnestly recommends that the pious custom of burying the bodies of the dead be observed; it does not, however, forbid cremation unless it has been chosen for reasons which are contrary to Christian teaching" (No. 1176, 3). Therefore, a person may choose to be cremated if he has the right intention. However, the cremated remains must be treated with respect and should be interred in a grave or columbarium.

A pastoral problem with cremation has concerned their presence at the funeral Mass and then their placement afterwards. Until recently, the cremains could not be present for the funeral Mass. On March 21, 1997, the Sacred Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments granted an indult authorizing each local bishop to set a policy regarding the presence of the cremains for the funeral Mass. The Sacred Congregation emphasized that the cremains must be treated with respect and must be interred after the funeral Mass

In April 1997, the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments granted an indult for the United States to allow the diocesan bishop to permit the presence of the cremated remains of a body at a Funeral Mass.

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' 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. One is the use of "cremation caskets," which is essentially a rental casket with a cardboard liner that is cremated with the body. Another is a complete casket that is cremated (this casket contains minimal amounts of non-combustible material such as metal handles or latches).

When cremation takes place before the Funeral Mass, and the diocesan bishop permits the presence of cremated remains at the Funeral Mass.

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 on the home of a relative or friend of the deceased are not the reverent disposition that the Church requires.

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.

Does the Church have a preference for either cremation or burial of the body of the deceased?

Although cremation is permitted, Catholic teaching continues to stress the preference for burial or entombment of the body of the deceased. This is done in imitation of the burial of Jesus' body. "This is the Body once washed in baptism, anointed with the oil of salvation, and fed with the bread of life. Our identity and self-consciousness as a human person are expressed in and through the 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."

What are the steps to be taken?

When cremation is chosen for a good reason, the full course of the Order of Christian Funerals should still be celebrated, including the Vigil Service (wake), the Funeral Liturgy, and the Rite of Committal. The preservation of this order allows for the greater expression of our beliefs and values, especially, the sacredness of human life, the dignity of the individual person and the resurrection of Jesus Christ, the firstborn of the dead. Through its funeral rites, the Church commends the dead to the merciful love of God and pleads for the forgiveness of their sins.

Should cremation occur before or after the funeral?

The Church clearly prefers and urges that the body be present during the Vigil and Funeral Mass, and that if cremation is to be used, it take place following the Rite of Final Commendation. The cremated human remains would then be interred during the Rite of Committal. However, the diocesan bishop may for a good reason permit the cremated remains to be present for the Funeral Liturgy.

What should become of the cremated remains following the funeral?

Church teaching insists that cremated remains must be given the same respect as the body, including the manner in which they are carried and the attention given to their appropriate transport and placement. The cremated remains of a body are to be buried or entombed, preferably in a Catholic cemetery, and using the rites provided by the Order of Christian Funerals. The following are not considered to be reverent dispositions that the Church requires: scattering cremated remains, dividing cremated remains and keeping cremated remains in the home. The remains of a cremated body should be treated with the same respect given to the corporeal remains of a human body. This includes a worthy container to hold the cremated remains.

The Catholic Church's practice of burial goes back to early Christian days. A strong belief in the body as the temple of the Holy Spirit, as well as the belief in the resurrection of the body, support the Church's continued reverence for the human body. From early Christian days cremation was viewed as a pagan practice and a denial of the doctrine of the Resurrection. That's why cremation was expressly forbidden by the Catholic Church until recent years

Burial of the Body is the Norm

The Catholic Church, in keeping with our belief in the resurrection of the body, has always seen traditional burial or entombment as the normal manner of reposing the body of a deceased member of the faithful as they await that day when they will rise in glory with the Lord. This ancient custom remains the norm.

Cremation Permitted if Done with Respect for Christian Belief

In the past, the Church prohibited cremation because it was often associated with a denial of the resurrection of the body. In 1963, the Church ended this prohibition. It still, however, “earnestly recommends the pious custom of burying the bodies of the dead be observed; nevertheless, the Church does not prohibit cremation unless it was chosen for reasons contrary to Christian doctrine.” (1983 Code of Canon Law, canon 1176,§3)

Cremation Follows the Funeral Liturgy

Thus, when cremation is chosen for worthy reasons, the Church respects that decision. However, cremation is to take place only after the funeral liturgy. The funeral liturgy specifically calls for the presence of the body as a sign of our belief in its sacred dignity: “This is the body once washed in baptism, anointed with the oil of salvation and fed with the bread of life.” (Order of Christian Funerals)

Families are encouraged to contact their parish prior to finalizing arrangements with the funeral home to ensure that the body of the deceased is given the proper respect at the funeral liturgy in accordance with the rites of the Church. (If, the body has already been cremated prior to making arrangements for the funeral rites, a pastor can obtain special permission from the Bishop’s Office for the cremated remains to be present at the funeral liturgy.)

Cremated Remains to be treated with Reverence

The Catholic Church teaches that cremated remains are to be treated with the same dignity and reverence due a non-cremated body. They are to be contained in a worthy vessel and buried or entombed. Cremated remains are not to be scattered in the air, on the water or on the ground. Nor are they to be divided up among relatives or friends, or stored at home. Catholic cemeteries have grave spaces and niches for cremated remains. This gives loved ones the opportunity to visit and pray for the deceased and to reflect on our faith in the resurrection of the body, as did the early Christians in the catacombs.