

CATHOLIC PRACTICES and ANSWERS REGARDING CREMATION¹

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“In death, the separation of the soul from the body, the human body decays and the soul goes to meet God, while awaiting its reunion with its glorified body. God, in His almighty power, will definitively grant incorruptible life to our bodies by reuniting them with our souls, through the power of Jesus’ Resurrection.” (Catechism of the Catholic Church, 997)

“Eternal rest grant unto them, O Lord, and let perpetual light shine upon them. May the souls of all the faithful departed, through the mercy of God, rest in peace. Amen.”

THE CHURCH AND CREMATION:

As a Catholic may I be cremated?

Yes, although burial of the body is preferred. This is because Catholic belief in the body as the temple of the Holy Spirit, the fact that Jesus’ body was buried, as well as our faith in the resurrection of the body, places a *strong* preference for entombing or burying the body whole and intact. Scripture teaches that we are created in the image and likeness of God (Genesis 1:26-27) and from that teaching Catholics accord a great deal of respect to the human body in life and in death.

Cremation has been permitted in the Catholic Church since 1963, although the cremated remains were not allowed to be present during the funeral Mass. In 1997 the pope gave the bishops of the United States an indult (an approved exception to Church law) to allow the celebration of the funeral Mass with the cremated remains present, provided that the local bishop permits cremation. The Bishop of the Diocese of Saginaw permits it.

Nevertheless, cremation is forbidden if it done as an expression of denial regarding the teaching of the resurrection of the body. Today, most people who choose cremation over traditional burial do so for cost reasons, not to renounce or contradict the doctrine of bodily resurrection.

Do I need to ask the Church for permission to be cremated?

No, but it is a very good idea to discuss your reasons for cremation with your priest *before* making your decision.

¹ Based on <http://www.catholiccemeterysaginaw.com/cremation.html>

CREMATION:

When should cremation take place?

If cremation has been chosen, the Church *strongly* prefers that it occur only *after* the full funeral liturgy with the body. The presence of the body most clearly brings to mind the life and death of the person and better expresses the values that the Church affirms in her rites.

“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. ... 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. ... However, 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, including the Vigil for the Deceased, the Funeral Liturgy, and the Rite of Committal. The funeral liturgy should always be celebrated in a church.” (Reflections on the Body, Cremation, and Catholic Funeral Rites, Bishops' Committee on the Liturgy)

Is it necessary to embalm?

Embalming is usually necessary whenever cremation follows the funeral liturgy. Embalming is usually not necessary when cremation is to follow soon after death. Each state has its own regulations in this matter, but generally the rule is that a deceased human body that is not buried or cremated within 48 hours is to be embalmed. Nevertheless, simple embalming and the rental of a casket for a funeral Mass need not be expensive.

Is it necessary to purchase a casket?

No, it is not necessary to purchase a casket for cremation. All that is required is a simple container in which the body can be transported and placed in the cremation chamber. Casket rental is an option if you choose to have the body present for Mass with cremation to follow. Many funeral directors offer regular caskets for rent, as well as special cremation or shell caskets which you may purchase.

REVERENT HANDLING AND PROPER INTERMENT OF THE CREMATED REMAINS:

What is the proper container for the cremated remains?

Appropriate, worthy containers such as a traditional urn are appropriate for the cremated remains and are not necessarily expensive. The U.S. Bishops' Committee on the Liturgy has determined only what is *not* a proper container. Although jewelry, dishes, statuary and space capsules are examples of novelty containers now being marketed, they are *unacceptable* in Catholic funeral practices.

How are the cremated remains to be transported?

Transportation of the cremated remains is a matter of personal choice. Individuals personally carrying a deceased person's ashes will often have the added responsibility of packing and

transporting the urn. Using the principle of reverence for the body, you may wrap the container of the cremated remains with the possibility of sending it as accompanying baggage or take it along as carry-on luggage. Ask the airline office or the state's Department of Public Health for specific information about your region of travel before preparing the cremated remains for transport by air. Where no legal regulations exist regarding transport of the cremated remains, the cremated remains are often shipped in a standard container by U.S. Mail or other common carriers. In those cases, check with the post office or carrier for their requirements.

Must the cremated remains be buried/entombed?

Yes. Respectful final disposition of the cremated remains involves interment or entombment *as soon as possible* following the funeral Mass. The remains should never be stored (e.g., until the death of the spouse) or displayed (e.g., on a mantle). If possible, interment should be at a Catholic cemetery, which is blessed ground and is maintained by the parish or the diocese.

An option is the entombment of the cremated remains in a columbarium. This is an arrangement of niches, such as in a mausoleum, wherein urns are placed for permanent memorial.

May I separate the cremated remains into multiple urns or scatter the ashes?

No. *"The practice of scattering the cremated remains on the sea, from the air, or on the ground, or keeping the cremated remains in the home of a relative or friend of the deceased are not the reverent disposition that the Church requires."* (Order of Christian Funerals, Appendix II #417) Thus, it is forbidden to separate the ashes into multiple urns or other objects such as locketts and jewelry. Likewise, it is not permitted to keep unburied or unentombed cremated remains, even at home.

Burial at sea of the cremated remains differs from scattering. An appropriate and worthy container, heavy enough to be sent to its final resting place, may be dropped into the sea. (Order of Christian Funerals, #406.4)

May anything be added to the cremated remains such as the cremated remains of other people, pets, or other objects?

The principle of respect for the cremated remains of a deceased Christian embraces the deeper belief in the individuality of each baptized person before God. Throughout history, the mingling of remains has never been permitted. It is acceptable, however, to place remains side by side in separate urns that will eventually disintegrate and mix the ashes after burial.

PRE-DEATH INSTRUCTIONS:

Who decides if I am to be cremated?

In most cases *you* make the decision to be cremated. However, your survivors may decide to have you cremated, generally due to special family circumstances, but rarely against your will.

How do I make my wishes known?

If you desire that your body be cremated, you can make those wishes known in your will and in documents designed to help plan and prepare your funeral.

Must I honor my parent's or spouse's wish to cremate them?

Out of respect for loved ones, you will want to do all you can to carry out the wishes of the deceased concerning funeral preparations provided they are in keeping with Church belief and practice. At the same time, you must always keep in mind the therapeutic and spiritual value to the family of celebrating the full funeral liturgy with the body present. This may significantly outweigh your reasons for cremation before the funeral liturgy.

FUNERAL RITUALS:

What funeral rites are celebrated when a person is cremated?

If cremation is to be done, the Church *strongly* prefers that it occur only *after* the full funeral liturgy with the body. When this is not possible, however, almost all the usual rites which are celebrated with a body present may also be celebrated in the presence of the cremated remains. In an appendix to the *Order of Christian Funerals*, the United States bishops have included prayers to be used when the cremated remains of a loved one are present in church. (*Order of Christian Funerals, Appendix II #432-438*)

The following rituals may be celebrated:

- Prayers After Death
- Gathering in the Presence of the Body
- Vigil for the Deceased
- Funeral Mass or Funeral Liturgy Outside Mass
- Rite of Committal

During the liturgies, the cremated remains are treated with the same dignity and respect as a whole and intact body.

Prayers After Death

This ritual is used immediately after death. The presence of the minister, the readings, and the prayers can be of great comfort to the family. (*Order of Christian Funerals, #101-108*)

Gathering in the Presence of the Body

This ritual can also be of great comfort to family members and friends. It allows for a time of simple prayer and shared silence. (*Order of Christian Funerals, #109-118*)

Vigil for the Deceased

Friends and family may still gather to pray if cremation has already taken place. While it has been a tradition to pray the rosary in some regions, the Vigil for the Deceased is a brief Liturgy

of the Word service, which includes prayer for the deceased and recognition of his/her Christian life. (*Order of Christian Funerals, #54-97*)

Funeral Mass

Should I schedule a funeral Mass before or after cremation?

If cremation is to be done, the Church *strongly* prefers that it occur only *after* the full funeral liturgy with the body. If it is not possible for the body to be present at the funeral Mass, however, an indult has been granted by the pope which provides for the celebration of the Mass with the cremated remains in church.

What length of time is there between death, cremation and the funeral Mass?

This depends on various factors, just as in the case of funerals with a body. The place of death, the location of the crematory, scheduling a time for cremation, the schedule at the church, and other circumstances all affect the timing. Once all arrangements have been made, you should generally allow at *least* one day between death and the celebration of the funeral liturgy, although it is usually several days. Generally, the funeral and the burial should follow the death as soon as possible. It is *inappropriate* to delay burial without just cause (please consult your priest).

What happens at the Funeral Mass with the cremated remains?

A journey which began at baptism comes to conclusion as we enter into eternal life. Significant attention should be given to the primary symbols of the Catholic funeral liturgy, as stated in the *Order of Christian Funerals* and its commentaries. The paschal candle and sprinkling with holy water are primary symbols of baptism and should be used during the funeral Mass. The use of the pall is omitted at funerals with cremated remains, however.

The cremated remains should be treated with the same dignity and respect as the body. They are to be sealed in a worthy vessel. They may be carried in procession and/or placed on a table where the casket normally would be with the Easter candle nearby. Photos, flowers, and other mementos may be used, but they are *not* to be placed in the sanctuary or in front of the altar, nor can they be distracting from the liturgical action. Such items are to remain in the nave by the table with the urn or in the narthex.

Rite of Committal

As with a body, the cremated remains are always laid to rest with solemnity and dignity. (*Order of Christian Funerals, Appendix II #438*) Properly speaking, a “funeral” is incomplete until burial or entombment. Therefore, it is inappropriate to delay interment without just cause, or to do so without the Rite of Committal.

As always, please contact your parish priest if you have any questions. Thank you.