

For Catholics Considering Cremation: Part 1 – Overview of Cremation

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When a loved one passes away, a wide range of considerations must be taken into account. One of the most important of those considerations is the method of disposition for the earthly body. Throughout the history of the United States, burial has traditionally been the most common method of disposition. However, in recent decades, cremation has rapidly increased in popularity, due in large part to the vast range of options that it affords families to have a personalized and meaningful memorial. In fact the rate of cremation, as a means of disposition, has grown to around 50%, as opposed to just 4% in 1960. Projections show that cremation will outpace traditional burial in the next decade.

According to the teachings of the Catholic Church, burial is the prescribed method of disposition of our earthly body. The reasoning behind the Church's preference for burial is twofold. First, the Church views the body as the temple of the Holy Spirit, and thus it should be treated with the utmost reverence. Second, the Church believes in the resurrection of the intact body. Cremation has only recently begun to gain mainstream acceptance in the Catholic Church. Because of the long history of Catholic preference for burial, many Catholics are unfamiliar with the process of cremation.

The purpose of this series of articles is to provide a basic overview of cremation for Catholics. We will begin with a high-level snapshot of cremation. We will then examine the relationship of the Catholic Church with cremation, as well as the different cremation options that are available to you and your loved ones.

To begin, let us answer the question of what cremation is. Cremation is a procedure, during which human remains are reduced to their original chemical compounds, through the application of extreme heat and evaporation. The human remains are enclosed in a container – typically made of wood or cardboard – and delivered to a crematory to undergo the actual cremation process. After the body has been cremated, the substance that is left is known as the cremated remains, which primarily consist of fragments of dry calcium phosphates from the bones. These remains are placed in a receptacle, called an urn, for final disposition.

Unlike burial disposition, cremation itself does not represent the final disposition. After a person has been cremated, their cremated remains are then brought to their final resting place. In accordance with the Order of Christian Funerals, the Church requires that if funeral rites have been held for the deceased, their remains must be buried or entombed. If you decide that cremation is the best choice for yourself or a loved one, there are a vast array of options for incorporating viewing, visitation, and funeral rites into the memorial. In our next installment, we will discuss these options in greater detail.