

For Catholics Considering Cremation: Part 2 – Relationship Between the Church and Cremation

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The relationship between the Catholic Church and cremation is complex and evolving. As has been mentioned in the previous installment, burial – not cremation – continues to be the preferred disposition method of the Church.

Many Catholics believe that the Church forbids cremation; however, this is no longer the case. Since 1963, the Church has permitted cremation, which was previously banned by the 1917 Code of Canon Law. The fact that this ban was lifted does not mean that the Church endorses cremation. This point is further clarified in the revised Code of Canon Law of 1983, which states, “the Church earnestly recommends 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.” The Church’s preference for burial is due to the reverence of the body as the temple of the Holy Spirit, as well as the belief in the resurrection at the Last Judgement. It is not required for a Catholic to obtain permission from the Church to be cremated, but it is recommended that you discuss your intentions with your pastor.

As we mentioned previously, the Church strongly prefers that the cremation process occurs after the funeral liturgy with the body present. The presence of the earthly body, during the funeral liturgy, most effectively brings to mind the life and death of the person and better conveys the values that the Church affirms in its rites. As of 1997, the Vatican gave United States bishops permission to allow the funeral mass to be celebrated with cremated remains present. If the funeral mass is to be celebrated with the cremated remains present – due to either necessity of circumstances or insistence of family – then special permission must be granted by the local bishop. You can make this request to your pastor, and he will seek permission for you.

For a funeral mass with cremated remains present, the remains are treated with the same respect and dignity as the body. The paschal candle and holy water, which are principal symbols of baptism, are used during the funeral mass. The pall is not typically used, as it would be if the body was present. The cremated remains are to be sealed in a worthy and respectful vessel (such as a classic urn) and carried in procession, then situated before the altar. All rituals celebrated, when a body is present, may also be celebrated in the presence of cremated remains including:

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

For the final disposition, the Church requires that – after the funeral liturgy has been celebrated – cremated remains must be buried underground, entombed in a mausoleum or columbarium, or buried at sea. For burial at sea, the remains must be enclosed within a worthy vessel that is heavy enough to

be sent to its final resting place. Mixing of the cremated remains with other cremated remains or foreign substances is not a practice that is accepted by the Church. Remains are to be kept segregated because this reflects the individuality of each baptized person before God. Finally, scattering the remains by land, sea, or air, or keeping the remains in the home of a relative or friend, are not permitted, as these do not satisfy the Church's requirement of reverent disposition.

If you are a Catholic who is considering cremation, it is best to consult your clergy on the matter. They are best equipped to help you navigate the process, within the context of the Church's regulations.