

# QUESTIONS CONCERNING CREMATION, THE FUNERAL LITURGY, AND THE CATHOLIC CHURCH

## **The Church and Cremation**

### *As a Catholic may I be cremated?*

Yes. The Church's definite preference is for burial of the body. However, since 1963 cremation has been permitted, although the cremated remains were not allowed to be present during the funeral mass. In 1997 the Vatican gave the bishops of the United States permission to allow the celebration of the funeral mass with the cremated remains present, provided the local bishop permits it.

### *Do I need to ask permission to be cremated?*

No, but it is a good idea to discuss your reasons with your pastor. For a funeral mass with the cremated remains present, the local bishop needs to give his permission.

## **Cremation**

### *When should cremation take place?*

The Church *strongly* prefers that cremation take place *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 its 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?*

When cremation follows the funeral liturgy, embalming is usually necessary. When cremation is to follow soon after death, embalming is not necessary. 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 24 or 48 hours is to be embalmed or refrigerated. However, simple embalming and the use of a cremation casket need not involve excessive costs.

### *Is it necessary to purchase a casket?*

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

## **Careful Handling and Proper Interment of Cremated Remains**

### *What is the proper container for cremated remains?*

Appropriate, worthy containers (not necessarily expensive) such as a classic urn are proper for the cremated remains. At the present time 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 designer containers now being offered, they are *unacceptable* in Catholic funeral practices. It is also *unacceptable* to have cremated remains made into jewelry, dishes and the like.

### *How are cremated remains transported?*

Transportation of 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 respect for the

body, you may wrap the container of 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 cremated remains, most cremationists ship cremated remains in a standard shipping container by U.S. Mail or other common carriers.

### *Must cremated remains be buried/entombed?*

Yes. Respectful final disposition of cremated remains involves interment or entombment. Burial options include a *family grave* in a cemetery marked with a traditional memorial stone or an *urn garden*, a special section in a cemetery with small, pre-dug graves for urns.

### *What is a columbarium?*

A common practice is the entombment of the cremated remains in a *columbarium*. It is an arrangement of niches, either in a mausoleum, a room or wall into which an urn or other worthy vessel is placed for permanent memorial.

### *May I scatter the cremated remains?*

No. *The practice of scattering cremated remains on the sea, from the air, or on the ground, or keeping 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)* Burial at sea of 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. (*See Order of Christian Funerals, #406.4*) Please consult your local government for environmental regulations.

### *May anything be added to cremated remains such as the cremated remains of other persons, pets, 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 an accepted practice, except in extraordinary circumstances.

## Pre-death Instructions

### *Who decides if I am 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 services provided they are in keeping with Church practice. Yet, you must always keep in mind the therapeutic 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.

## The Funeral Rituals

### *What funeral rites are celebrated when a person is cremated?*

The Church *strongly* prefers that cremation take place *after* the full funeral liturgy with the body. However, when this is not possible, all the usual rites which are celebrated with a body present may also be celebrated in the presence of 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 the 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

If cremation has already taken place, friends and family may still gather to pray. While it has been a tradition to pray the rosary in some regions, the Vigil for the Deceased is a 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?*

The Church *strongly* prefers cremation *after* the Funeral Mass. However, if it is not possible for the body to be present at the Funeral Mass, an indult has been granted by the Holy See which provides for the celebration of the Mass with the cremated remains in church.

#### *Do I need permission to have cremated remains in church (for the funeral liturgy)?*

The indult granting the diocesan bishops of the United States authority to permit a funeral liturgy in the presence of cremated remains (in place of the body) requires two things. First, the diocesan bishop must authorize this practice for his diocese. Second, each individual case requires permission. Your pastor will need to seek permission for you.

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

The answer to this question depends on various factors, just as in the case of funerals with the body. The place of death, the location of the crematory, scheduling a time for cremation, the schedule at the parish church, and other circumstances impact 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.

### *What happens at the Funeral Mass with 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. However, the pall is not used. Photos and other mementos may be used at the vigil, but are not appropriate for the Mass. During the Mass, 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 coffin normally would be with the Easter candle nearby.

### ☉ Rite of Committal

The body is always laid to rest with solemnity and dignity. So too, the *Order of Christian Funerals* provides for the interment of cremated remains. (*Order of Christian Funerals, Appendix II #438*)

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This pamphlet is a collaborative effort of the Federation of Diocesan Liturgical Commissions and the Worship Offices of Michigan and Ohio in consultation with Rev. Richard Rutherford.

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