

CATHOLIC BURIAL PRACTICES

A helpful summary of the Church's teaching on cremation may be found in the 1998 statement of the Bishops' Committee on the Liturgy, *"Reflections on the Body, Cremation and Catholic Funeral Rites."*

"The Church's belief in the sacredness of the human body and the resurrection of the dead has traditionally found expression in the care taken to prepare the bodies of the deceased for burial." (OCF 411)

"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. Indeed, the human body is so inextricably associated with the human person that it is hard to think of a human person apart from his or her 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." (OCF 412)

Thus, while "cremation is now permitted, 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 its rites." (413) However, "when extraordinary circumstances make the cremation of a body the only feasible choice, pastoral sensitivity must be exercised by all who minister to the family of the deceased." (414)

The *Order of Christian Funerals* recommends that when cremation is chosen, the body be cremated after the Funeral, thus allowing for the presence of the body at the Funeral Mass. When pastoral circumstances require it, however, cremation and committal may take place even before the Funeral liturgy.

"The cremated remains of a body should be treated with the same respect given to the corporeal remains of a human body. This includes the use of a worthy vessel to contain the ashes, the manner in which they are carried, the care and attention to appropriate placement and transport, and the final disposition." (416)

While cremated remains may be buried in a grave, entombed in a mausoleum or columbarium or even buried at sea, "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." (416) The cremated remains of the body are to be buried or may be properly buried at sea in the urn, coffin or other container in which they have been carried to the place of committal.

The Church has always held a preference for corporeal body. The body of a deceased loved one forcefully brings to mind the mystery of life and death and our belief that our human bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit and destined for future glory at the resurrection of the dead. In addition, the body which lies in death recalls the personal story of faith, the past relationships, and the continued spiritual presence of the deceased person.

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The Order of Christian Funerals reflects a theology and a tradition in which burial of the body has been the principal manner of final disposition of the body. The long-standing practice of burying the body of the deceased in a grave or tomb as was Jesus, continues to be encouraged as a sign of Christian faith. However, owing to contemporary cultural interaction, the practice of cremation has become part of Catholic practice in the United States and other parts of the western world.

Disposition of the bodies of deceased Catholics by means of cremation is a fairly recent development. The 1917 Code of Canon Law forbade the practice, and this prohibition continued until 1963. While making allowance for cremation (as long as it was not chosen as a sign of denial of Christian teaching) the 1963 instruction *Piam et constantem* issued by the Holy Office urged that “the practice of burying the bodies of the faithful is by all means to be kept.” This 1963 concession is provided for in the 1969 *Ordo Exsequiarum*, the Latin edition of the revised Catholic funeral ritual and was later incorporated into the 1983 Code of Canon Law in canon 1176: “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.”

Although cremation is now permitted it does not enjoy the same value as burial of the body. Catholic teaching continues to stress the preference for burial of the body of the deceased. Likewise, the Church clearly prefers and urges that the body of the deceased be present for its funeral rites, since the presence of the human body better expresses the values which the Church affirms in its rites.

Sensitive to the economic, geographic, ecological, or family factors which on occasion make the cremation of a body the only feasible choice, however, the Administrative Committee of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops has recommended that the entire body of bishops that they request an indult from the Holy See permitting the presence of cremated remains during the full course of Catholic Funeral rites. Likewise, the Bishops’ Committee on the Liturgy has directed the Secretariat for the Liturgy to begin the preparation of additional rites and texts for the Order of Christian Funerals to provide for the presence of the remains of the cremated body.