



THE CHURCH'S NORMS OF CREMATION



St. Peter Catholic Church † Faith Fact † October 2014

ISSUE: What are the Catholic Church's norms on cremation? May a Catholic's cremated remains be present at the funeral liturgy celebrated for him? What may be done with a person's cremated remains after the funeral?

RESPONSE: The Church recommends and encourages the burial of Christian bodies, but allows for cremation when it is not chosen for reasons contrary to Church teaching (Code of Canon Law, nos. 1176 §3, 1184 §2°). In 1997, in an appendix to the Order of Christian Funerals, the Vatican provided an indult whereby each diocesan bishop in the United States may, at his discretion, allow for the presence of cremated remains at a funeral liturgy. The remains of cremated bodies must be treated with the same respect given to any human remains and they must be entombed. It is not in keeping with the reverent disposition that the Church requires to scatter cremated remains on the sea, from the air, or on the ground, or to keep them in the home of a relative or friend of the deceased (U.S. Appendix to the Order of Christian Funerals, no. 417).

DISCUSSION: The Code of Canon Law, no. 1176 §3 states that "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." In the past, the Church did not allow cremation because the practice was often employed by groups to deny Catholic doctrine, most significantly the resurrection of the dead and the immortality of the soul. In 1963, the Church modified its discipline and allowed for cremation, provided that people did not choose it for reasons contrary to Catholic doctrine.

In 1969, the Church made formal provision in the Order of Christian Funerals for the committal or entombment of cremated remains, but not for their presence at a funeral liturgy. However, after the U.S. Bishops requested permission, the Vatican Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments issued an indult in 1997 for the presence of cremated remains, providing an appendix to the Order of Christian Funerals for such liturgies.

In general, the Church provides that a person's body be buried in a grave or tomb and, in exceptional circumstances, at sea (Order of Christian Funerals, no. 204). The Church provides that the cremated remains of bodies also be treated with proper reverence:

The remains of cremated bodies should be treated with the same respect given to the corporeal remains of a human body. This includes the manner in which they are carried, the care and attention to appropriate placement and transport, and the final disposition. The cremated remains of a body should be entombed in a mausoleum or columbarium; they may also be buried in a common grave in a cemetery. The practices of scattering 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 (U.S. Appendix to the Order of Christian Funerals, no. 417).

Further inquiries in this matter can be directed to CUF, your diocesan liturgy office, or, if necessary, the Secretariat for the Liturgy, United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 3211 4th St., N.E., Washington, D.C. 20017-1194.

Catholics United for the Faith, Faith Facts: The Church's Norms for Cremation; <http://www.cuf.org/2004/04/the-churchs-norms-for-cremation/>.

NOTE: *In accord with the archdiocesan policy, a priest or deacon may not preside at a funeral without the guarantee that the cremains will be interred at the conclusion of the funeral rites. (From the pamphlet distributed by the Archdiocese of New Orleans entitled "Guidance for Catholics: Important Information Regarding Cremation and Words of Remembrance.")*