



## How Should We Treat The Remains Of The Dead?

by Joe Sixpack

Recently, I was asked what should be done with the remains of our cremated loved ones. More specifically, the questioner realized he knew someone who was keeping the remains and not disposing of them. Let's deal with that.

Just what is a Catholic's obligation regarding the remains of the dead? Well, let's give a brief history, then talk about ordinary burial, then talk about cremation.

Historically, Christians followed the Jews in disposing of corpses by burial rather than by cremation. The Christian thought was that cremation was an unnatural and violent destruction of the human body, the repository of the Holy Spirit for Catholics who had been baptized. But since no principal of faith would be jeopardized by cremation, it has always been allowed with permission when public health required it. However, for centuries cremation **was not** allowed, except in cases of public health. The reason for this, there were certain heretics who promoted cremation as a way of denying the bodily Resurrection at the end of time—when every human being will be raised from the dead; the condemned as they had been in life and the saved in their glorified bodies. The Church's wisdom was to combat the heresy by outlawing cremation. In more recent times, though, the Church has legalized cremation again, provided the cremation isn't being used to deny the Resurrection.

Now, the average Catholic in modern times doesn't realize that the Church still has laws regarding the disposal of human remains. Does the church have the right to declare laws regarding what we do with our loved ones when they die? Of course She does! To begin, as history has already demonstrated, the mind of the Church is that the body of a deceased loved one has to be treated with respect, as it was Home to the Holy Spirit in life. Indeed, the Church still prefers burial over anything else.

Apart from the respect factor, we have to remember that the burying of the dead is one of the seven corporal works of mercy. All Catholics are obliged to perform all seven of the corporal works of mercy—not just the ones we like.

According to the Catechism of the Catholic Church, "The bodies of the dead must be treated with respect and charity, in faith and hope of Resurrection. The burial of the dead is a corporal work of mercy; it honors the children of God, who are temples of the Holy Spirit."<sup>1</sup> It goes on to state, "The Church permits cremation, provided that it does not demonstrate a denial of faith in the resurrection of the body."<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Canon 1176, §3

<sup>2</sup> CCC, 2300



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Canon Law<sup>4</sup> also tells us that, "If a parish has its own cemetery, the faithful departed or to be interred in it unless another cemetery has been legitimately chosen either by the departed person or by those who are responsible to arrange for his or her interment."<sup>5</sup>

Let's quote Canon Law just a little bit more. "The Church is to have its own cemeteries wherever this can be done, or at least spaces in civil cemeteries destined for the faithful departed and properly blessed. If however, this cannot be achieved, individual graves are to be properly blessed as often as needed."<sup>6</sup> In short, the Church is very lenient when it comes to burying our dead, but still governs it.

Now let's put it all together. Okay, let's say you have a loved one pass away, but you like a civil cemetery that does not have a "Catholic" section. Is that where you can bury your loved one? Well, not as long as something else is available where there is hallowed ground. In other words, it would be against Canon Law (a sin) to bury a loved one in unhallowed ground. And unless there are special circumstances, the bishop cannot and will not hallow a grave site when there is hallowed ground available.

So what about the remains of a loved one we had cremated? It's quite popular these days to put the bodily remains urn on the mantle piece at home do keep loved one near us. However, it is the heart and mind of the Church that, "the faithful departed are to be interred" unless it is otherwise impossible to do.

Now I realize that a lot of people reading this are in the technical violation of Canon Law. That means those persons are objectively committing sin. However, you can only be guilty of sin when you know you are sinning. Unlike civil law, you cannot be accountable for ignorance of law. So those of you who have buried loved ones in unhallowed ground, your remedy is simple: Simply tell your priest you would like to have the grave of your loved one properly blessed. For those of you who have kept the remains of your cremated loved ones, you simply need to arrange a place of interment; i.e., an urn tomb or a blessed grave site.

This may not seem like an important issue to most people; however, it really is. You see, we Occidental Americans have been numbed in our consciences when it comes to respect for the human body. After all, it has become fashionable to tattoo our entire bodies and poke holes in the most immodest places to wear jewelry. This demonstrates a lack of self-respect as well as bodily respect. So you can see why people have lost their sense of respect for the human body. When it comes to woefully inadequately catechized Catholics (about 99.5%), we find that we are more in-tuned to the modern culture than the heart of the Church. This should demonstrate to us the need for a strong consideration of our rejection of modern culture and reacquaint ourselves with the heart and mind of the Catholic Church. Think about it.

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4. What is Canon law but the binding and loosing on earth for the binding and loosing in heaven? See Matthew 16: 19 and Matthew 18: 18.

5. Canon 1180

6. Canon 1240

7. There is no sin in getting tattoos and body piercings, so long as they are not done in private areas of the body and are done moderately