



# Cremation and Funeral Liturgies

The experience of death is one which touches the lives of every person. As Christians, we look to Christ, to our faith and to the Church as sources of hope and consolation, courage, meaning and peace. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* teaches: “The Christian meaning of death is revealed in the light of the Paschal mystery of the death and resurrection of Christ in whom resides our only hope. The Christian who dies in Christ Jesus is ‘away from the body and at home with the Lord.’ For the Christian the day of death inaugurates, at the end of his sacramental life, the fulfillment of his new birth begun at Baptism, the definitive ‘conformity’ to ‘the image of the Son’ conferred by the anointing of the Holy Spirit, and participation in the feast of the Kingdom which was anticipated in the Eucharist – even if final purifications are still necessary for him in order to be clothed with the nuptial garment. The Church who, as Mother, has borne the Christian sacramentally in her womb during his earthly pilgrimage, accompanies him at his journey’s end, in order to surrender him ‘into the Father’s hands.’ She offers to the Father, in Christ, the child of his grace, and she commits to the earth, in hope, the seed of the body that will rise in glory. This offering is fully celebrated in the Eucharistic sacrifice; the blessings before and after Mass are sacramentals” (1681-1683).

When a death takes place, a number of decisions are made which require much discernment and pastoral care. Among these are the funeral rites and the disposition of the remains. As an alternative to a traditional burial, in Canada, cremation has been permitted for Catholics for a number of years now. Most recently, in December 2017 the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, acknowledging a pastoral need, granted permission for the “Order of Christian Funerals: Supplement for Celebrations with Cremated Remains” to be used *ad experimentum* for five years in dioceses across Canada.

Early Christians followed the Jewish practice of giving honourable burial to the dead. They did not use cremation. These early Christians made great efforts to retrieve the bodies of their martyrs and bury them with honour, as one witnesses in the catacombs. As a result, in Christian countries the practice of cremation more or less disappeared as it was deemed pagan. In fact, it was made a capital offense by civil authorities such as Charlemagne through his law in 789. In the latter part of the nineteenth century various groups introduced the practice of cremation in Europe, where for many centuries the Christian custom of earth burial had been the only way to dispose of the bodies of the deceased. The Church suspected that the motives of those promoting cremation were anti-Christian, and therefore, in 1886, prohibited cremation for Catholics, legislating that the practice was incompatible with a Catholic burial.

Cremation as such was never seen as incompatible with Christianity, but it was the motives that were suspect. When it became apparent that cremation was also being promoted for reasons that were not anti-

Christian, the Church, in 1963, lifted its prohibition giving Catholics the possibility of cremation, unless it is for reasons that are contrary to Christian teaching. This was introduced into the 1983 Code of Canon Law in canon 1176 § 3.

Today many choose cremation for a variety of reasons, not excluding cost.

## The Funeral Liturgy

The importance of each of the three main services in the rites (the Vigil, the Funeral Liturgy, and the Rite of Committal) should be stressed in the planning of funerals in order that the family and Christian community may have time to face the reality of death and draw hope and comfort in their time of sorrow.

The traditional rites help the family, friends and Christian community to enter more fully into the process of grieving. The act of grieving includes the acceptance of the reality of death, the expression of sadness at the loss of a loved one, the outpouring of love for the deceased, the gathering of a family and community around the bereaved, and the expression of faith and hope in the resurrection of Jesus as a sign of what God plans for us. This remembrance continues through the Church’s intercession for all members of the Body of Christ, both living and deceased.

Christian Funeral Rites may be celebrated for persons who have chosen to have their bodies cremated, unless it is evident that they have acted for reasons which are contrary to the Christian faith. In most cases it is recommended that cremation take place following the celebration of the Funeral Liturgy. However, it is permissible for cremation to take place before the Funeral Liturgy.

In all cases, the body or cremated remains of the deceased must not obscure the focus of the celebration on the paschal mystery of Jesus Christ and the action of God in the assembly. Again, the Church teaches that: “The bodies of the dead must be treated with respect and charity, in faith and hope of the 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” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2300).

## When Cremation Takes Place After the Funeral Liturgy

The vigil for the deceased and the funeral liturgy are celebrated as usual, with a slight change in the final commendation after the funeral liturgy to indicate that the procession with the body will proceed to the crematorium and not to the cemetery.

If the family and friends accompany the body to the crematorium, prayers “At the Crematorium: Gathering in the Presence of the Body”

may be prayed there. The Rite of Committal is celebrated when the cremated remains are buried or entombed.

## When Cremation Takes Place Before the Funeral Liturgy

For a variety of reasons the decision is sometimes made to have cremation take place before the funeral rites are celebrated. If family members and friends gather at the crematorium, the prayers “At the Crematorium: Gathering in the Presence of the Body” may be prayed there.

The cremated remains of the deceased are to be treated with the same reverence that is given to the body of the deceased. The cremated remains are placed in their entirety in a secure vessel.

## Funeral Liturgy with Cremated Remains Present

The cremated remains may be present during the Vigil and the Funeral Liturgy as per the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments (Prot. No. 327/84). For the Funeral Liturgy a small table covered with a white cloth is prepared for the cremated remains near the altar. The cremated remains are never placed on or immediately in front of the altar.

The vessel containing the cremated remains may be either put on the table before the liturgy begins, or carried with dignity and reverence in the Entrance Procession. [The person carrying the cremated remains follows the presider. The mourners may follow.]

If the cremated remains are placed on the table beforehand: After the people have assembled, the Funeral Liturgy begins. The presiding minister greets the mourners informally, or with the words provided in the ritual book.

In Canada it is often the custom to place a picture of the deceased near the vessel of the cremated remains during visitation at the funeral home. During the Funeral Liturgy, which is an act of worship and thanksgiving to God, it is preferable that pictures not be displayed. Pictures can be displayed at a reception following the funeral.

## The Use of Christian Symbols

When the cremated remains of the deceased person are present for any of the Funeral Rites, the Christian symbols used in a Funeral Liturgy where a body is present are appropriately used here as well.

- The Paschal (Easter) candle is placed near the table as a reminder of Christ’s undying presence among the faithful.
- Holy water, a reminder to the assembly of the saving waters of Baptism,
- Incense, a sign of the community’s prayer for the deceased rising to God, may be used during the Final Commendation.
- If it is the custom of the parish to place a white pall over a casket, then a small white pall (veil) may be placed over the vessel containing the cremated remains. This is especially appropriate if the form/nature of the container might be a distraction or draw undue attention.

## Final Disposition of Cremated Remains

The cremated remains are placed in their entirety in a secure vessel and are reverently buried or entombed in a place reserved for the disposition of the dead; that is, in a grave, a mausoleum, or a columbarium, as soon as possible after cremation has taken place (cf. Congrega-

tion for the Doctrine of the Faith, Instruction, *Ad resurgendum cum Christo* regarding the burial of the deceased and the conservation of the ashes in the case of cremation, August 15, 2016).

Scattering the cremated remains or keeping them in the home of a family member does not exhibit appropriate reverence for the remains of the body which was the temple of the Holy Spirit (cf. *Ad resurgendum cum Christo*).

The faith of the Church reminds us that “from the beginning the Church has honored the memory of the dead and offered prayers in suffrage for them, above all the Eucharistic sacrifice, so that, thus purified, they may attain the beatific vision of God. The Church also commends almsgiving, indulgences, and works of penance undertaken on behalf of the dead” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1032).

## A Final Word

As we accompany a dying person, with faith, love and friendship, on their journey into eternity, we are reminded that: “The dying should be given attention and care to help them live their last moments in dignity and peace. They will be helped by the prayer of their relatives, who must see to it that the sick receive at the proper time the sacraments that prepare them to meet the living God” (*Catechism of the Church*, 2299).

Families are encouraged to approach their pastor or a pastoral minister regarding arrangements for funeral services before they make plans with a funeral director. Funeral Liturgies constitute a vital part of the grieving and healing process. They give families and friends a formal, communitarian, spiritual and faith-filled way of remembering and saying goodbye. In the face of death, the Church confidently proclaims that God has created each person for eternal life and that Jesus, the Son of God, by his death and resurrection, has broken the chains of sin and death that bound humanity. For a Christian especially, whose life of faith was begun in the waters of Baptism and strengthened at the Eucharistic table, the Church intercedes on behalf of the deceased because of her confident belief that death is not the end, nor does it break the bonds forged during earthly life. The Church also ministers to the sorrowing and consoles them in the funeral rites with the comforting Word of God and the sacrament of the Eucharist. The deceased are commended to God’s merciful love and, though separated from the living, they are still at one with the community of believers on earth and benefit from their prayers and intercession. In this way it recognizes the spiritual bond that still exists between the living and the dead and proclaims its belief that all the faithful will be raised up and reunited in the new heavens and a new earth, where death will be no more.



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