

What the Catholic Church Teaches Regarding Cremation

Can a Catholic be cremated?

The practice of burying the body goes back to early Christian times. For centuries cremation was expressly forbidden in the Church because of the belief that the body is the temple of the Holy Spirit, as well as the belief in the resurrection of the body. Cremation was seen as a pagan practice that denied the doctrine of the Resurrection.

In 1963, the Vatican lifted the ban on cremation for Catholics. In doing so, the Church allowed cremation in certain circumstances provided the reasons for choosing it did not counter Christian belief.

However, no allowances were made for any prayer or rituals to be used with the cremated remains. This meant all funeral services were to occur in the presence of the body, with cremation taking place afterward. On March 21, 1997, this changed. The Vatican granted an indult for the cremated remains of a body to be brought into church for the liturgical rites of burial. **It is still, however, the Church's preference to have the full compliment of funeral rites take place with the body present and then have cremation afterward.**

ORDER OF PREFERENCE FOR BURIAL BY THE CHURCH

First Preference: Funeral rites with the body present. It is the Church's preference that the body of the deceased be present for the Vigil Service. In addition, the body of the deceased should be brought to the local parish church for the Funeral Mass. Funeral Masses are not permitted in funeral homes or cemetery chapels. The Rite of Committal of the body normally takes place at the cemetery although the committal can be done at the end of the Funeral Mass. The body of the deceased is to be interred, either in the ground or in a crypt following the Funeral Mass.

Second Preference: Funeral rites with the body present and cremation afterward. When the choice has been made to cremate the body, it is recommended that the cremation take place after the Funeral Liturgy. In this case, the Vigil for the Deceased and related rites and prayers should be celebrated in the presence of the body. Then, the body should be brought to the parish church for the Funeral Mass with cremation taking place afterward. After cremation of the body, the cremated remains should be committed for burial according to the Order of Christians Funerals. The cremated remains should be treated with the same respect given to the human body. Therefore, they should be buried in a grave or entombed in a mausoleum or columbarium (but not a

common/communal columbarium). This is the reverent disposition of the cremated remains that the Church requires.

Third Preference: Funeral rites with the cremated remains present. While the Church has granted an indult for the celebration of the Funeral Liturgy, including Mass, in the presence of the cremated remains of the deceased it is considered the least desirable of the options. The Church strongly prefers that the body of the deceased be present for its funeral rites since the presence of the body clearly recalls the life and death of the person. Realizing that the practice of cremation is being chosen for a variety of reasons, including economy and practicality, often cremation has occurred before the funeral rites. When this does happen, the Vigil for the deceased may be celebrated in the presence of the cremated remains. Likewise, the cremated remains may be brought to the church for the celebration of the Funeral Mass.

CAN CREMATED REMAINS BE SCATTERED OR KEPT IN THE HOME?

The Church believes cremated remains of a body should be treated with the same respect given the human body from which they come. If cremated remains are not treated with honor and dignity, cremation can allow for disrespect of the human body. Scattering the ashes deprives loved ones and descendents the opportunity to visit the remains where they can pray and reflect upon the life and memory of the deceased. Dividing the cremated remains among family and friends for keeping them in the home seems to diminish the respect for human life and shows a lack of proper respect and dignity for the dead.

Taken from Catholic Funeral Rites Diocese of St. Petersburg