HISTORY OF CREMATION AND THE CATHOLIC CHURCH

In the very earliest days of the Church, one of the negative reactions toward the Church by the Roman Empire was that after the Christians had been martyred, their bodies were cremated and the remains scattered. This way the Romans could declare that there was no way the Christian God could reunite the body and soul of the Martyrs as preached by the Disciples. Two results of this program were the development of the Catacombs and the prohibition of cremation as a choice for Christians for the final disposition of the body after death.

Permission was given to use cremation under extraordinary circumstances such as the years of the plague in Europe during the Middle Ages, but as a general rule the Catholic Church outlawed cremation as an un-Christian act that was an attempt to disprove the basic belief in the reuniting of the body and soul at the final Resurrection.

(The Romans practiced cremation as their choice of final disposition for hundreds of years but then had to switch to ground burial and Mausoleum entombment when they ran out of forests in Italy to supply the wood for all the cremations.)

The Church has always emphasized the dignity of the human body as the Earthen Vessel of the Holy Spirit. It has supported this position from the moment of conception, through the life cycle, at the time of death and particularly how this Earthen Vessel is handled after death. Since the human body has been the receptacle for the Holy Spirit, and we do believe it is our destiny to resurrect our body and soul with God, the Church has always taught that during the Christian Funeral Rite and the final disposition, the body must at all times be treated with Christian dignity.

“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.”

(1)

During the Vatican II Council a discussion was started of how to use cremation in a manner that would fit into the Christian Funeral Rite and allow the human body to be treated with the dignity it deserves. It had become apparent that many times the use of cremation was following a local custom, was necessary for economic or health reasons and was no longer an anti-Christian statement.
Following Vatican II the “Order of Christian Funerals” was developed to present the Church’s plan for the celebration of the death of one of its members. “When the rites of the Order of Christian Funerals are fully celebrated, they ritualize the paschal exodus of one of the Lord’s disciples: the journey from life to death to fullness of life in God.” (2)

The desire to allow for cremation led to Canon 1176 in the 1983 Code of Canon Law. “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 entombment of the body of the deceased.” (3)

The disposition of the cremated remains is of prime importance to the Church. The Church requires that at all times that human remains at all times be treated with dignity and respect, be they corporeal of cremated remains. Therefore the Church has stated that all human remains must be buried or entombed, preferably in a Catholic Cemetery. “The practices 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 are not the reverent disposition that the church requires.” (4)

Quick Synopsis:

> The Code of Canon Law does allow cremation unless this option is chosen in opposition to Christian teachings.

> The Church prefers that the full body be present in the church for the funeral liturgy and cremation occur after the funeral.

> With the permission of the local Ordinary the cremated remains may be allowed in the church for the full funeral liturgy.

> The scattering of cremated remains, the keeping of cremated remains in a place other than a cemetery, the division of the cremated remains into more than one container is not permitted by the church because it does not allow for the reverent disposition of the “Earthen Vessel of the Holy Spirit”.

(2) Ibid, page 6
(3) Ibid, page 9
(4) Ibid, page 11

See also Cremation and the Catholic Church (PDF)