

THE CATHOLIC FUNERAL RITES

Diocese of St. Petersburg

Catholics & Cremation

Q. *Can Catholics be cremated?*

A. 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 so doing, 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 afterwards.

On March 21, 1997, this changed. The Vatican granted permission 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 complement of funeral rites take place with the body present and then have cremation afterwards.

All too often people say, "Funerals are for the living, not the dead." For Catholics such a statement is not complete, because the Catholic funeral rites offer us the opportunity to praise and thank God for the love and mercy He has shown the deceased person. It also is a time where the community of believers prays for the repose of the soul of the deceased, and offers consolation to the surviving family and friends.

The purpose of this handout is to briefly explain the Catholic funeral rites. It also offers a few simple guidelines that may help families when placed in the situation of making funeral arrangements.

Christians celebrate the funeral rites to offer worship, praise, and thanksgiving to God for the gift of life which has now been returned to God, the author of life and the hope of the just. The Mass, the memorial of Christ's death and resurrection, is the principal celebration of the Christian funeral.

Order of Christian Funerals, no. 5

The core of the *Order of Christian Funerals* is the Mass. Other rites, such as the Vigil or Rite of Committal, complement the Funeral Liturgy or the Mass. Despite this directive, many of the faithful wonder which rites should be celebrated. The discussion is further complicated when dealing with cremation (see side box) and how it fits into the schema of the *Order of Christian Funerals*.

Listed below is a "hierarchy" of sorts for Catholic funerals. It lists in order of preference those practices which are deemed acceptable by the Catholic Church for funeral liturgies.

◆ **FIRST PREFERENCE: Funeral rites with the body present**

The Church holds up as normative the rites contained in its ritual book: the *Order of Christian Funerals*. Normally these rites include: a Vigil Service celebrated at the funeral home or the church, the Funeral Liturgy itself, and the Rite of Committal of the body at the cemetery. Despite being valuable expressions of faith, the rosary and other traditions are not to replace the Vigil for the Deceased. However, it would be acceptable that these devotions are celebrated in addition to the Vigil Service, but at another time.

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 afterwards***

When the choice has been made to cremate a body, it is recommended that the cremation take place *after* the Funeral Liturgy. In this situation, 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 Liturgy with cremation taking place afterwards.

After cremation of the body, the cremated remains should be committed for burial or interment according to the *Order of Christian 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 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 occur, the Vigil for the Deceased may be celebrated in the presence of the cremated remains. Likewise, the cremated remains may be brought to church for the celebration of the Funeral Mass.

Q. Why doesn't the Church allow cremated remains to be scattered or kept in a home?

A. 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 opportunity for disrespect of the human body. Scattering ashes deprives loved ones and descendents of 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 or keeping them in the home seems to diminish the respect for human life and shows a lack of proper respect and dignity for the deceased loved one.