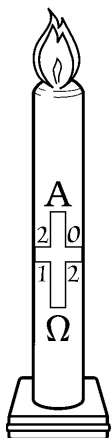


Cremation: New Options for Catholics

by Fran Helner

In 1997 the Holy See granted permission to U.S. bishops to allow funeral Masses in the presence of cremated remains. This practice had been available in Canada and a few U.S. dioceses for some time. In this Update we'll look at the reasons behind the permission and the ritual changes that will soon be available in many U.S. dioceses. We'll also explore why the Church continues to prefer burial over cremation.

Before looking at the particulars of the cremation changes, it is important to understand why they are necessary in the first place. The following true example from my parish might help. I was present not long ago while the parish said our good-byes to a beloved member whose family had chosen cremation. Ever since retirement, Mr. McFarland and his wife would spend a good portion of winter in Florida, away from the long Michigan winters. When he suffered a heart attack and died while in Florida, the family had to decide how best to deal with the situation.



With family, friends and parish all back in Michigan, there was no question where the funeral needed to be. Yet from a practical point of view, particularly for financial reasons, it was not feasible to ship his body. Cremation was a more viable option. The family knew that the Catholic Church has permitted cremation since the 1960's. However, they were not aware of the liturgical limitations resulting from their choice.

As his daughter related to me later, an uneasy feeling began when the pastor told the family that when their dad's cremated remains arrived from Florida they should gather at the cemetery for the Church's Rite of Committal. After the burial of the cremated remains, they would gather a few weeks later at Sacred Heart Church to celebrate a memorial Mass for their father.

The pastor explained to them that the Catholic Church did not allow cremated remains to be present in church during the celebration of a funeral liturgy. The Catholic Church has always had the utmost respect and reverence for the human body and the prayers of the funeral liturgy reflect this.

The memorial Mass for Mr. McFarland was a peaceful celebration of his life, a good opportunity for family, friends and parish community to gather, to remember, to pray, to return this loved one to God. And yet there was something missing; some part of it did not feel quite right to many present.

Similar stories abound from throughout the United States. For some families, the inability of the local parish to hold a funeral Mass caused further grief during an already difficult time. Many pastors and parish members felt frustrated at the parish's inability to minister fully to families in their hour of need. Some families even felt a sense of alienation from the Church when denied a funeral Mass with the cremated remains present.

All of these situations add up to a real pastoral concern, especially as the preference for cremation continues to grow across the country. That is why the U.S. bishops, aware of the situation and sensitive to the pastoral needs of Catholics, requested permission from Rome to allow funeral rites, including the Eucharist, to be celebrated in the presence of cremated remains.

The permission that was granted spells out the changes allowed in cases of necessity. These changes will be discussed in greater detail later in this Update. Although the Church still strongly encourages burial or entombment of a body over cremation, many Catholic parishes will occasionally be celebrating funerals in the presence of cremated remains.

Catholics and cremation

The Catholic Church's practice of burial goes back to early Christian days. A strong belief in the body as the temple of the Holy Spirit, as well as the belief in the resurrection of the body, support the Church's continued reverence for the human body. From early Christian days cremation was viewed as a pagan practice and a denial of the doctrine of the Resurrection. That's why cremation was expressly forbidden by the Catholic Church until recent years.

In 1963, an Instruction from the Holy Office (now the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith) lifted the ban on cremation by allowing it in certain circumstances

provided that the reasons for choosing cremation were not contrary to Christian belief. However, burial of the body was clearly to be preferred. No allowance was made for any prayer or ritual to be used with the cremated remains. In other words, all services were to be in the presence of the body of the deceased, with cremation allowed only afterwards.

In the revised funeral rites of 1969, *Ordo Exsequiarum*, mandated by Vatican II, a further step was taken to allow for the Committal Rite to take place at the crematorium or grave site: “Funeral rites are to be granted to those who have chosen cremation, unless there is evidence that their choice was dictated by anti-Christian motives....The funeral is to be celebrated...in a way that clearly expresses the Church’s preference for burying the dead...that forestalls any danger of scandalizing or shocking the faithful” (#15). The presumption was that the funeral Mass would be celebrated in the presence of the body with cremation held off until later.

In the 1983 revision of the Code of Canon Law, the traditional practice was reinforced. “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” (Canon 1176).

The further revised funeral rites, *Order of Christian Funerals*, in use since 1989, maintain this tradition of preference for burial of the body: “Since in Baptism the body was marked with the seal of the Trinity and became the temple of the Holy Spirit, Christians respect and honor the bodies of the dead and the places where they rest...” (#19).

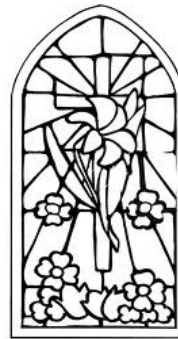
A threefold ritual

The *Order of Christian Funerals* prescribes three separate and ideally sequential rites to celebrate the journey of the deceased from this life to the next. This movement or progression of rites can be helpful to the mourners going through this period of separation and letting go of their loved one.

The principal celebration is the funeral liturgy, which is typically a Mass. Two smaller celebrations also take place. The vigil for the deceased is a short prayer service during the time following death and before the funeral liturgy. It usually takes place at the funeral home. The rite of committal is a short prayer service at the cemetery, ideally beside the open grave or place of interment. Both

of these short services include Scripture, prayers and possibly songs. The ideal sequence of these three funeral rites is vigil, funeral Mass, then committal.

Up to this time, with cremated remains banned from church, the only way to solve the problems created by immediate cremation (cremation before the funeral) was to reverse the order of these rituals, that is, have the rite of committal (burial) at the cemetery first and then have a memorial Mass. However, committing the remains for burial prior to the funeral liturgy often does not satisfy the need for the mourners to have something of the deceased present when gathering for the final farewell. The prayers of the funeral liturgy praise and thank God for the gift of this person’s life whom we are now commending to God, as well as being a source of hope for all of the living.



In the United States up until 1997, the *Order of Christian Funerals* clearly indicated that if cremation had been chosen, cremated remains were not to be brought into church for the funeral Mass. Even now this is permitted only in cases where special circumstances warrant it and the bishop approves. The reasoning is that the funeral rites are intended to honor the body of the deceased.

It was the body which felt the waters of Baptism, was marked with the oil of salvation and nourished by the Bread of Life. The sprinkling of the casket with holy water and the draping with the white pall are reminders of Baptism. The body is the incarnation of the presence of God in the world, the temple of the Holy Spirit. There is a substantial difference between the body of the deceased and cremated remains. The Church’s thinking has rightly been that we cannot just substitute one for the other and expect our rituals and prayers to carry the same meaning.

Yet ashes and bone chips that remain after cremation are something—there is a real connection between them and the body. So why not have them present to remind us of the one whose life we are celebrating? As sacramental people we need the “stuff” of the senses around us to help us get in touch with the deeper reality. After all, these cremated remains bear the imprint of the first creation when they were fashioned from dust. The traditional Ash Wednesday formula says it well: “Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return.” Catholics can easily make the connection between these remains and the body of the person they knew and loved.

There is no problem with this if cremation is to take place after the funeral Mass. A rite of committal for cremains (cremated remains) is provided as an alternative in the current funeral rite. The difficulty arises when cremation is done before the funeral—as in the earlier case of the retired Michigan man who died in Florida. Yet in dioceses whose bishops choose not to allow funeral Masses in the presence of cremated remains, a reversal of the rites is one solution for a less-than-ideal situation.

Here is how that might work for a diocese that will not be making the changes. For example, a person dies a few days after a critical auto accident far from home. In the days before death, the family determines that cremation will be the only feasible option. A vigil rite could be celebrated at the deathbed using the final commendation (a prayer of farewell) over the body at this time. This is the final commendation that is usually at the end of the funeral Mass, asking the Lord to accept the deceased into paradise. Then, after the body is cremated, the rite of committal would be used at the place of burial.

Following the committal all would come to church for the funeral liturgy, without the body present.

Recognizing that this reordering of the funeral rites is less than ideal is why many bishops will use the new permission to allow cremains at the funeral Mass and retain the funeral rite's threefold sequence.

Cremation trends

One reason that Catholics in the United States need an exception to the standard funeral rite is that the choice of cremation as a means of final disposition is growing each year. Catholic Cemetery magazine (May 1997) reports that recent studies have shown that more than 20 percent of U.S. deaths end in cremation. A local funeral director indicated the figure to be as high as 25 percent in the metro Detroit area. Other sources indicate that the percentage is closer to 50 percent in the states of Florida and California. The national average is expected to rise to 33 percent within the next 15 years.

The reasons for choosing cremation are several, but cost seems to be one of the biggest. Immediate cremation, that is, within 48 hours of death, without the use of funeral home facilities for a wake, can cost as little as one fourth the cost of the usual procedure. Obviously, if cremation is the last step, that is, following the funeral Mass with the body present, there is not a substantial cost difference. When death occurs at a location significantly distant from where the wake and burial will take place, though,

cremation before the remains are transported may be the only affordable choice.

Hygienic reasons can also apply. If the person dies from an infectious disease, cremation might be considered safer. Some may make the choice just because of simplicity or ecological concerns. It is easier to handle a small box or vessel than a casket. Cremains take less space in a world becoming ever more conscious of responsible land use.

The Church's decision to allow cremation recognizes the fact that sometimes it best meets the needs of the family. On the other hand, the Church continues to discourage immediate cremation. Grieving in the presence of the body over several days can help people to deal with their loss.

Mourners need sufficient time to remember and celebrate the life of the deceased; to begin to grow accustomed to the absence of a loved one. The Church wants to encourage families to take the time needed to say their good-byes, to encourage the grieving process. plaque or stone memorializing the deceased

The new cremation regulation, dated March 21, 1997, was granted by the Holy See as an addition, or indult, to the *Order of Christian Funerals*. It permits U.S. Latin-rite bishops to decide whether to allow a person's cremated remains at Catholic funeral Masses in their dioceses. The permission is to be granted on a case-by-case basis. It is also clear in the indult that when cremation is chosen, "it is greatly to be preferred that the funeral liturgy take place in the presence of the body of the deceased prior to its cremation." But when cremation has already occurred a bishop can grant permission for a properly sequenced ritual: vigil, then funeral Mass, then committal rite.

What will be different?

If the Ordinary (bishop) of the diocese has determined it permissible to celebrate the funeral liturgy in the presence of cremated remains, it is to be carried out in the following manner. The remains of the body are to be placed in a "worthy vessel" and placed on a table in the spot usually occupied by the coffin. The vessel may be placed there before the Mass begins or it may be carried in the entrance procession.

The paschal candle may be placed in a prominent position just as it is when a body is present. Prayers chosen are to be those which do not make specific reference to the body

of the deceased. Explicit baptismal references are omitted in the presence of cremated remains. It was the body that was washed in Baptism, not these remains, so care has been taken to make this distinction clear.

In typical funerals, the casket-enclosed body is sprinkled with holy water while the following prayer is said: “In the waters of Baptism N. died with Christ and rose with him to new life. May he/she now share with him eternal glory.” The casket is then draped with the pall, a white cloth which recalls the white garment of Baptism.

A sprinkling of the cremains with holy water is accompanied by a prayer that does not directly stress Baptism: “As our brother/sister N. has died with the Lord, so may he/she live with him in glory.” That prayer plus the absence of the white pall are the most significant liturgical changes resulting from the new regulation.

A small change comes in the prayer of committal of cremated remains. Earthly remains is substituted for body: “In the sure and certain hope of the resurrection to eternal life through our Lord Jesus Christ, we commend to Almighty God our brother/sister N., and we commit his/her earthly remains to the ground [or the deep or their resting place] [earth to earth], ashes to ashes, dust to dust...”

It is optional to incense the cremains at the funeral liturgy, just as it is optional to incense a body.

Care of cremated remains

The cremation instructions call attention to the care taken of the cremated remains. They should be treated with the same respect we give to the body of the deceased. The remains are to be placed in a worthy vessel which then is carried and transported with the same respect and attention given to a casket carrying a body.



Their final disposition is equally important, say the instructions: “The cremated remains should be buried in a grave or entombed in a mausoleum or columbarium [a cemetery vault designed for urns containing ashes of the dead]. The practice 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 of the

deceased are not the reverent disposition that the Church requires.” The instructions also state that, if at all possible, the place of entombment should be marked with a plaque or stone memorializing the deceased.

The Human Body

“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. Indeed, the human body is so inextricably associated with the human person that it is hard to think of a human person apart from his or her body. Thus, the Church’s reverence and care for the body grows out of a reverence and concern for the person whom the Church now commends to the care of God.”

— *Order of Christian Funerals*, Appendix II (1997)

To love as Jesus did

The rituals of the Catholic Church adapt to the cultural needs of its members. Sometimes the outward rites change, but basic beliefs and values are not sacrificed. The Church continues to prefer and encourage the faithful to bury the bodies of their departed loved ones. However, if cremation is chosen for worthy motives, the Church wishes to support the faithful in honoring the life and memory of the departed.

Facts About Cremation

Cremation totally incinerates the body by intense heat and flame. All substances are consumed and vaporized except bone fragments and any noncombustible materials. The bone fragments may be further pulverized after cooling. These remains weigh anywhere from 4 to 10 pounds. What we commonly call “ashes” are really not ash as we know it, but bone particles.



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