

## Cremation and the Catholic Church

### **Q: Does the Catholic Church permit the body of the faithful departed to be cremated?**

Yes, since Vatican II the church does allow the cremation option under certain circumstances and understandings. In Canon 1176 paragraph 3 it is written; “The church earnestly recommends that the pious custom of burying the bodies of the dead be observed; it does not, however, forbid certain cremation unless it has been chosen for reasons which are contrary to Christian teaching.”

### **Q: So why is there so much controversy?**

The Catholic Church has a long history with cremation. During the earliest days of Christianity those that were opposed to the new Christian religion expressed their disbelief in many ways. One of those ways was that after the death of a Christian, non believers would mutilate then cremate the body. This was an effort to prove that the Christians were wrong when they said the body and soul would someday be reunited.

In effort to combat this, the Catholic Church forbade the use of cremation as an option for the disposal of the body. The early church also believed that the body was the former Temple of the Holy Spirit and therefore should be treated with more respect than the cremation process offered. Since many of the earliest Christians were Jewish their custom of burying the dead was also followed. The prohibition against cremation was continued throughout the centuries with the exception of extreme emergencies such as the plague that swept through Europe.

### **Q: When did the rule change?**

The rule was changed as a result of action taken during the Second Vatican Council.

### **Q: Why did the rule change?**

During the Vatican II deliberations it became clear that many Catholics wanted to choose cremation for reasons that were in no way anti-Christian. These reasons included local customs and mores, financial considerations and lack of nearby available burial space. After careful consideration of the question, new rules were published after Vatican II that allow for cremation as long as it is not done as a statement against Catholic teachings or beliefs.

### **Q: Should the funeral Mass take place before or after cremation?**

The preference is to have the full corporeal remains in the parish church for the funeral Mass and then cremation take place. Following the cremation the committal is done with a small prayer service. Recently, permission has been granted for the cremated remains to be brought into the parish church for the funeral Mass. This allows for the immediate committal of the remains as part of the Rite of Christian Funerals.

**Q: What about the final disposition of the remains?**

This is the area that has caused the most confusion and controversy. What remains after cremation are the remnants of the bones of the deceased, there are not ashes. Since these cremated remains are parts of the original Temple of the Holy Spirit on earth The Church requires that the remains be treated with the same dignity and respect with which the corporeal remains are treated. The remains must be buried or entombed and may not be separated, scattered, stored or displayed. As always the preference is for burial in a Catholic Cemetery.

## 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 (they are not ashes, what they really are, are the ground up bones that did not incinerate during the cremation process) is also of prime importance to the Church. The Church requires that at all times that human remains be treated with dignity and respect be they corporeal or 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".*

(1) Reflections of The Body, Cremation, and Catholic Funeral Rites, Committee on the Liturgy, National Conference of Catholic Bishops, United States Catholic Conference, Washington, D.C., Copyright 1997, Page 4.

(2) Ibid, page 6

(3) Ibid, page 9

(4) Ibid, page 11