

Catholic Church's stance on cremated remains

Q. What is the church's position on cremation? What happens to the "ashes"? What's the difference between a "Mass of Christian Funeral" and a "Mass of the Resurrection"?

A. In the past 25 years, cremation has become more and more popular with North American Catholics. While in many countries this process is done at the very end as a means of final disposition of the body, in the United States it is most often done immediately, prior to the funeral rites. Until very recently, cremated remains were not allowed in the church for the funeral liturgy. In 1997, however, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops responded to pastoral needs and granted permission for Catholic parishes to celebrate the funeral liturgy with cremated remains present.

It is important to note that interment of the body in a recognized cemetery is still the preferred Catholic form of final disposition. The body holds a place of preference in our sacramental encounters with the living God through the body of Christ, dead and risen. The state of corporeal remains - lost at sea, destroyed by fire, decomposed in the earth, or cremated - in no way affects Christian belief in the resurrection of the dead.

Therefore, cremation, followed by a respectful manner of preserving the cremated remains in a place of memorial, is authorized. The only changes in the liturgical rite are that the white pall is not used, and reference is made to earthly remains instead of to a body.

How we care for a person's mortal remains following cremation is new to the tradition and deserves its own place in American Catholic life. The Order of Christian Funeral states that "the cremated remains of the body are to be placed in a worthy vessel" and "a small table or stand is to be prepared for them in the place normally occupied by the coffin." The term "ashes," by the way, is never used since what remains are bone fragments.

What kind of vessel can we find that is both liturgically and aesthetically appropriate, and capable of bearing the weight of the mystery that was the human person?

The ossuary, or “bone box,” is now a possibility for use in parish funeral celebrations with cremated remains. This is actually a very old practice, common in the early church. At that time bodies were buried directly in the ground; then several months later, they were exhumed and stone boxes carved the length of the longest bone. They were then used to preserve the remaining bone fragments and placed in niches or cloister walls. Many are still visible in church excavations on the Mount of Olives and around Jerusalem, often plain stone, etched with a name or decorated with a simple carved cross.

Consistent with the funerary tradition of the church, the use of a modern ossuary or ark incorporates the reality of cremation into the liturgy in a way that is equally dignified for rich and poor alike. While the white pall is used to cover the coffin when the body is present, reminding us that it had been clothed in a white baptismal garment and making all caskets equal, it is not permitted with cremated remains.

The ossuary avoids any distinction between urns or containers that hold the remains. In the Catholic spirit of noble simplicity, this is a substantial vessel especially fitting for ritual actions such as sprinkling, incensing and procession. With a funeral ossuary and stand, a parish community is able to fulfill the bishops’ mandate to “claim due Christian respect for all mortal remains as the final form of the flesh and blood person who lived and died and will rise in relationship with God.”

Finally, the proper term for a Catholic funeral Eucharistic liturgy is “Mass of Christian Funeral.” Every Mass we celebrate is a Mass of the Resurrection! Therefore, to limit it to a funeral liturgy is incorrect.

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