

CREMATION?

Cremation is a process whereby a dead body is reduced to ashes by fire. The ancient world knew four methods of disposing of the bodies of the dead. Cremation was the normal practice of Greeks and Romans. Many of them believed in the immortality of the soul and saw no reason to give special attention to the body. Hindus, with their doctrine of reincarnation, still practice cremation. At the other extreme were the Egyptians, who mummified their dead, preserving the corpse indefinitely.

As the catacombs in Rome attest, the early Christians insisted on burying their dead. Christian gravesites were called *coemeteria* (cemeteries), which literally means "sleeping places," reflecting belief in a future resurrection. Early liturgies for the dead included the reading of Scriptures, prayers, hymns, and almsgiving for the poor.

Why were Christians so concerned about proper disposal of the body? Here are four reasons: (1) The body of every human was created by God, bore his image, and deserved to be treated with respect because of this. (2) The centrality of the Incarnation. When the Word became flesh, God uniquely hallowed human life and bodily existence forever. (3) The Holy Spirit indwelt the bodies of believers, making them vessels of honor. (4) As Jesus himself was buried and raised bodily from the dead, so Christians believed that their burial was a witness to the resurrection yet to come.

The Body and Sacred Relics

The word relic comes from the Latin *relinquo*, literally meaning I leave, or I abandon. A relic is a piece of the body of a saint, an item owned or used by the saint, or an object which has been touched to the tomb of a saint. Traditionally, a piece of the body of a saint especially that of a martyr, may be with the permission of the local ecclesiastical authority used in solemn processions recalling the specific holy person.

There are three classes of sacred relics. The first-class is a part of the saint's body. (It is this type which is placed in an altar stone.) The second-class is a piece of the saint's clothing or something used by the saint, while the third-class is an object which has been touched to a first-class relic.

The veneration of sacred relics has a long history in the Church. It is commonly held that the first account of such veneration stretches back to the martyrdom of St. Polycarp, bishop and martyr, who was killed by being burned at the stake in the amphitheatre at Smyrna around the year 155 A.D.

Scripture teaches that God acts through relics, especially in terms of healing:

- When the corpse of a man was touched to the bones of the prophet Elisha the man came back to life and rose to his feet (2 Kings 13:20-21).

- A woman was healed of her hemorrhage simply by touching the hem of Jesus' cloak (Matthew 9:20-22).
- The signs and wonders worked by the Apostles were so great that people would line the streets with the sick so that when Peter walked by at least his shadow might 'touch' them (Acts 5:12-15).
- When handkerchiefs or aprons that had been touched to Paul were applied to the sick, the people were healed and evil spirits were driven out of them (Acts 19:11-12).

In each of these instances God has brought about a healing using a material object. The vehicle for the healing was the touching of that object. It is very important to note, however, that the cause of the healing is God; the relics are a means through which He acts.

Incorrupt Bodies of the Saints

Furthermore we see the miraculous manifested again in the bodies of deceased saints whose bodies have failed to undergo the normal process of decomposition as a sign of their holiness. Bodies that undergo little or no decomposition, or delayed decomposition, are sometimes referred to as *incorrupt* or *incorruptible*. There are several hundred incorruptible saints including St Bernadette Soubirous, Saint Francis de Sales, St John Bosco and the tongue of St. Anthony of Padua.

St. Anthony died on June 13, 1231, his body was buried in the little Franciscan Church of St. Mary in Padua. By 1263 (only 32 years after his death!), a great basilica had been constructed so that his relics could be placed below the high altar. When the crypt was opened, they found that the saint's body had been reduced to dust and bones, but his tongue was intact and life-like. This was taken as a sign from God confirming the ardent gifts of preaching and teaching that Saint Anthony had enjoyed on earth.

So we see that God manifests his power through created physical things, including the deceased bodies of the Saints. This phenomena is predicated on the burial of the body and not the unnatural destruction of the body by cremation.

What does the Church teach about Cremation?

Witnessed by simple men and women, the Resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth confirmed the hope deep in the human heart that we will not be extinguished after death, that *there is an eternal future for both our body and our soul.*

Jesus' unique human claim about the resurrection of the body is the truth that underlies all of the Church's teachings on cremation. Because Christ has shown us this human destiny in Him, it is fitting that the Church requires that the deceased body be treated with prayerful reverence and great dignity in recognition of its glorious future.

The Catholic Cemetery exists for this purpose: to be a prayerful resting place memorializing the existence of deceased men and women who now await the resurrection of the body in Christ.

Cremation and Catholics Today

Many Catholics have questions about the Church's teachings on the growing practice of cremation. This is understandable since before 1963, the Church insisted that Catholics follow only the manner of Christ's burial by either entombing or burying the body. Even today, the Church acknowledges that "cremation does not hold the same value" as this traditional way of allowing the body to go gently back into the earth (Order of Christian Funerals, Reflections, p. 14).

The revised Code of Canon Law of 1983 helps Catholics understand that the 1963 lifting of the prohibition forbidding Catholics to cremate their deceased loved one's remains was never intended as an endorsement: "The Church earnestly recommends 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 Church now allows for cremation of the body, providing that family members making that decision are not doing so because they fear the body is lost forever and has no future together in Christ with the immortal soul.

Treatment of Cremated Remains of the Body

Cremation of the body quickly reduces the body to about four to ten pounds of bone fragments. The Church requires that these remains of the body be placed in a respectful vessel and treated in the exact same way that a family would treat a body in a casket.

Since the human body has an eternal destiny in any form, the Church requires that cremated remains of a body be buried or entombed immediately after the Funeral in the same timely manner as a body. Cremated remains of a loved one are not to be scattered, kept at home or divided into other vessels among family members, just as it is clear that these practices would desecrate a body in a casket. The Church allows for burial at sea, providing that the cremated remains of the body are buried in a heavy container and not scattered.

All of these teachings on the treatment of cremated remains of the body correspond with the Christian's foundational belief in eternal life—both body and soul—in Jesus Christ among the Communion of Saints.

When to Cremate

The Church clearly prefers and urges that the full body be present for the funeral rites (OCF, 414). The Catholic Funeral rites are sacred acts that help bereaved families on their journey over several days through mourning, prayer, consolation and separation from their deceased loved one, in the company of friends and neighbors. “The body that lies in death recalls the personal story of faith, the past relationships, and the continued spiritual presence of the deceased person” (OCF, Reflections, p. 11).

While the decision to cremate the body immediately after death would seem to help move this painful journey along more quickly, it can actually hinder a healthy mourning process by thwarting a family’s ability to fully confront the mystery of death in the presence of a body that can be recognized in love. Current death care industry trends show an increase in the practice of immediate cremation before the family can have a “viewing” of the body in death. At the same time, there has also been an increase in the need for bereavement counseling and aftercare.

Many funeral homes provide for a simple embalming and a regular casket for rent during the viewing and funeral. Purchase of a special shell or cremation casket is usually available for this same purpose.

However, if cremation must take place immediately after death and upon the approval of the particular diocese, the cremated remains of the body can be present in church during the Funeral Mass provided that they are reverently buried or entombed afterwards.

The Catholic Funeral Rites in the Presence of Cremated Remains of the Body

The sacred Catholic Funeral Rites are communally prayed in three parts: the Vigil Rite; the Funeral Liturgy; and, the Rite of Committal. While the rites all assume the presence of the full body, some adaptations in the traditional texts can now be made if the body has already been cremated. The rituals are meant to take place in sequence to console the family and provide prayerful sustenance to the soul of the deceased. “Ritual action is especially important at times of greatest mystery, for events that we find difficult to apprehend because they are too beautiful or too sorrowful” (OCF, Reflections, p. 12).

After the Funeral, the cremated remains of the body should be reverently buried or entombed in a cemetery or mausoleum (OCF, Reflections, p. 15).

“In death, the separation of the soul from the body, the human body decays and the soul goes to meet God, while awaiting its reunion with its glorified body. God, in his almighty power, will definitively grant incorruptible life to our bodies by reuniting them with our souls, through the power of Jesus’ Resurrection.”

—Catechism of the Catholic Church, 997