

Cremation for Catholics

Cremation has been a practice of the Catholic Church since 1963, restrictions allowed very few Catholics to choose it. In recent years, changes to these conditions made by the Catholic Church have enabled cremation to be considered an acceptable option.

Where Does the Church Stand on Cremation?

Because traditional funeral rites are intended to honor the body of the deceased, it is still preferred by the Catholic Church that the physical body of the deceased be present during Mass. After the traditional rites of the service have been performed, cremation is carried out. There are two reasons for this practice. The presence of the body at Mass shows reverence for the body and contributes toward the belief in resurrection of the body and the promise of eternal life. For relatives and friends it is an opportunity to view the body, express condolences and come to terms with the passing of their loved one.

Changes the Church has Made

Since many Catholics find cremation to be a necessity at times, the important issue of whether or not the presence of cremated remains at Mass is acceptable needed to be officially addressed.

In 1997, the National Conference of Catholic Bishops' request for an indult allowing for cremated remains to be present at Mass was answered favorably. The decision, passed down by the Congregation of Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, grants each diocesan bishop the right to decide whether this practice will be allowed in his diocese.

When permission is granted, certain changes in the wording of funeral rites, as well as ceremonial modifications, must be made. These can be discussed in detail with your clergy.

The *Order of Christian Funerals*, Appendix 2: Cremation, gives instructions for three different possibilities:

1. When cremation takes place following the Funeral Liturgy
2. When cremation and committal take place following the Funeral Liturgy
3. When the cremated remains are present during the Funeral Liturgy

In the case of the third option, the cremated remains are to be placed in a worthy vessel on a small stand positioned where the casket normally would be. The urn may be carried to its place in the entrance procession or may be placed at the front of the Catholic Church before the liturgy begins.

Embalming

If cremation is to take place following the funeral liturgy, embalming is usually necessary. When cremation takes place soon after death, embalming is not necessary. Generally, the deceased that is not buried or cremated within 24-48 hours will need to be embalmed or refrigerated.

Purchasing a casket for cremation

It is not necessary to purchase a casket for cremation. If the body will be present for the funeral Mass with cremation to follow there are a couple of options, a casket rental, or the purchase of a special cremation shell casket.

Transportation of Cremains

Additional care must be addressed when packing a transporting an urn with cremains. If transportation by airline is necessary, usually there are two options: carefully packed in checked baggage, or in carryon baggage by some airlines. Documentation verifying cremation from the funeral home and the death certificate is needed. Alternatively, cremains may be shipped through a private shipper. The standard operating procedure is for cremains to be inspected via x-ray machine. Consider using a sealed sturdy plastic container to transport cremains on a plane. TSA rules allow for transportation of ashes on a plane, but each airline has different policies. Be sure to visit the individual airline websites for full details.

Funeral Rituals that may be celebrated in accordance to the *Order of Christian Funerals*

- Prayers After Death: used immediately after death in the presence of a minister with readings, and prayers.
- Gathering in the Presence of the Body: allows for time of simple prayer and shared silence.
- Vigil for the Deceased: This is a Liturgy of the Word service, including prayer for the deceased and recognition of his/her Christian life. In some regions praying the rosary is part of this tradition. Display of photos and other mementos are appropriate at this time.
- Funeral Mass or Funeral Liturgy Outside Mass: The journey from baptism concludes when we enter eternal life. The paschal candle and sprinkling with holy water are used during a funeral Mass. The cremated remains are treated with the same dignity and respect as the body. They are in a sealed appropriate vessel and carried in procession and placed on a table where the coffin would normally be located near the Easter candle.
- Rite of Committal: The body is laid to rest with solemnity and dignity with the internment of the cremated remains.

What should I know about the final disposition of cremated remains?

The remains are to be treated with dignity and respect, placing them in a worthy vessel for interment. Designer containers such as jewelry, dishes, statuary or space capsules are unacceptable. Remains of other persons, pets, or other objects should not be included in the vessel. As it is also unacceptable to have cremains made into jewelry, dishes, or other similar keepsakes.

Once burial rites are held, cremated remains are to receive appropriate disposition in the form of traditional in-ground burial in a private or Catholic cemetery, or entombment in an above ground columbarium niche, crypt or mausoleum. Interment in this manner allows for permanent memorialization of the deceased, as well as providing a place of visitation and prayer for family members and friends. The presence of a site marker or plaque plays an important role in aiding family and friends with the grieving and healing processes that occur with the loss of a loved one.

How does the Church feel about scattering ceremonies?

Cremation itself is not a final means of disposition as it applies to the Catholic faith. The scattering of remains, an irreversible process, or permanently placing a loved one's urn in the home of a relative, is not considered to be in harmony with the reverence that the Catholic Church requires.

The exception would be a burial at sea, in which a worthy vessel containing a complete set of remains is placed at sea in a formal rite of committal ceremony.