



Considering Cremation?

A Reflection on the Reverent Internment of Cremated Human Remains

Some years ago, the Church gave wider permission for cremation and lifted traditional restrictions on having cremated remains present in the church for funeral Masses.

A Pastoral Provision --- Extending this permission is pastorally understandable though traditional burial (or internment) of the body is still preferred. Very few if any people these days choose cremation for the reasons it had traditionally been forbidden, namely as a denial of the resurrection of the body. Generally, these days, the reasons cremation is chosen are economic, due to the increasingly high cost of traditional burial. However, the cost savings is not as significant today as it once was.

Certain Recent Trends that are Problematic --- Though the Church recognizes cremation as a fitting and understandable option for Christian Burial, certain recent trends related to cremation are inappropriate and should not be considered as fitting. Among these trends is the failure to secure proper internment for the remains by placing them on mantles, or in closets, the scattering them or the dividing the remains between relatives, or even the making jewelry and other objects and keepsakes from the cremated remains.

Therefore, please consider some of the basic norms from the Church regarding cremation:

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 (Code of Canon Law No. 1176,3).

Although cremation is now permitted by the Church, it does not enjoy the same value as burial of the body. The Church clearly prefers and urges that the body of the deceased be present for the funeral rites, since the presence of the human body better expresses the values which the Church affirms in those rites (Order of Christian Funerals no. 413).

The cremated remains of a body should be treated with the same respect given to the human body from which they come. This includes the use of a worthy vessel to contain the ashes, the way they are carried, and the care and attention to appropriate placement and transport, and the final disposition. The cremated remains should be buried in a grave or entombed in a mausoleum or columbarium. (ibid).

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 (cf Order of Christian Funerals # 417).

Perhaps the quickest way to summarize these norms is that we should treat the cremated remains of a loved one in the same way we would treat their body. For, in fact, this is what remains of their body. And just as we would not think to scatter body parts about, or to have one relative take an arm home and other take the torso, neither should we do this with the cremated remains. And surely, we would not think to melt part of their body down into jewelry or retain them (other than perhaps a lock of hair) as keepsakes. Neither would we fail to bury them at all.

Basic Requirements for Reverent Internment --- So again, the key point is to treat the cremated remains just as we would treat the full body. Reverent handling and proper disposition are essential.

And this means that. Proper Internment of the remains should be sought, and this means either in cemetery grounds or a mausoleum. Most cemeteries these days have special mausoleums (sometimes called columbariums) with small covered and secured niches where the cremated remains can rest. Proper internment should not be delayed. Ideally it takes place the day of the funeral, if not, very shortly afterward.

Cremated remains should not be scattered or strewn on open ground, in gardens, forests or any place. Neither should they be scattered into the air from a plane, or on the surface of the sea. The cremated remains should remain intact, in a properly sealed container or box, and interned as a single unit.

What about financial Hardship? For some families, the choice of cremation is based on financial hardship, so this choice often means also that there is no plan or ability for committal or burial of the cremated remains. As a means of providing pastoral support and an acceptable respectful solution to the problem of uninterred cremated remains, Catholic Cemeteries offer to properly inter these remains at little or no cost. Some of these offer a common vault in a mausoleum for the interment of the cremated remains. The names of the deceased interred there are kept on file, though they are not usually inscribed on the vault. Other Cemeteries maintain an area for the burial of both cremated remains and the bodies of those who cannot afford a gravesite with a personal marker. So, the lack of money should not hinder the proper internment of cremated remains.

Conclusion – Cremation, though less ideal than the burial of the body, is permitted by the Church as a pastoral provision and is often the needed solution today for increasing numbers. However, we ought to be aware of the need to handle cremated remains of with the same reverence we have for the full body of a human person. The cremated remains of a human person are not “ashes.” They are human remains and should be regarded as such. One of the last gifts we can give our loved ones is the proper and reverent internment of what remains of the body. This along with our prayers for their souls, remains a duty and a work of mercy. It should be handled with devotion and all proper reverence.