

A Historical Perspective

From 1886 to 1963 the practice of cremation was forbidden for Roman Catholics around the world. In the spirit of Vatican Council II (1962-1965), the practice was restored in 1963. Nevertheless, over 40 years later, uncertainty regarding cremation remains prevalent among Catholics.

Yes, Catholics can choose to be cremated. The revised Code of Canon Law (1983) states: *The Church earnestly recommends that the pious custom of burial be retained; but it does not forbid cremation, unless this is chosen for reasons, which are contrary to Christian teaching* (Canon 1176, paragraph 3). Obviously, denial of the Resurrection of the body or an attachment to non-Christian (secular or religious) beliefs would be *contrary to Christian teaching*.

Going back into Christian history and tradition, the Church has always expressed a preference for full-body burial, whether above-ground or in-ground. The risk taken by Joseph of Arimathea to claim the body of Jesus after his death on the cross shows the respect Christians have for the human body and its reverent burial. God not only created us in the fullness of our humanity, but also sent his Son to take on our body and our nature. Being made in the image and likeness of God makes our bodies innately honorable.

Look at the elaborate efforts, again risking arrest and death, of the Christians living in persecuting Rome. They worshipped underground and buried their dead in catacombs, over 300 miles of excavated tunnels and caverns.

Actually, the Church did not have difficulty with the process of reducing a human body to its component parts by fire, as much as with the internal attitudes or beliefs often underlying this external action.

Why did Christians move away from cremation?

- × Faith in the Resurrection of the body
- × Reverence for the body as a member of the Body of Christ and a temple of the Holy Spirit
- × A strong reaction to persecutors' burning of bodies as a taunt against belief in the Resurrection

Why can Christians choose cremation?

- × Transfer of the remains from a distant place
- × Financial, ecological or space considerations
- × National or ethnic customs
- × Concerns or fears about burial or entombment
- × Simple personal preference or a choice made on behalf of another

A Need For Reflection

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 manner in which they are carried, 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. 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. Whenever possible, appropriate means for recording with dignity the memory of the deceased should be adopted, such as a plaque or stone which records the name of the deceased.

— REFLECTIONS ON THE BODY, CREMATION AND CATHOLIC FUNERAL RITES (A Statement by the National Conference of Catholic Bishops of the United States, 1997, paragraph 417)

Although cremation is now acceptable for faithful Catholics, further reflection is needed: what are the reasons for choosing cremation and what does this mean for the Christian funeral **and burial**.

Is there a plan for burial as final placement?

Many cremated remains linger in closets or basements, on shelves or tables. The statutes of the State of Wisconsin declare cremation to be final disposition [HFS 135.06 (3) (b)], but the teachings of the Catholic Church call for gatherings, prayer and rituals from the Order of Christian Funerals. Final disposition is the act of placing the cremated remains in a cemetery. The burial place should be reverent, public, documented, marked and maintained. The decision to cremate is NOT the final decision in funeral planning.

Is too much attention being devoted to novelty or unusual practices, rather than simply doing what is reverent and traditional?

Maintain an awareness of the Resurrection and its future hope. Mingling, dividing up, scattering on water or land are NOT in keeping with the Church's teaching. Burial at sea means placing the cremated remains inside a container and then into the deep, not scattering atop the water. Putting cremated remains into a locket or using them a "raw material" to create an object is not proper. Sometimes the short-term desire for a "send off" that is customized and personalized overwhelms a long-term view based on remembrance, permanence and prayer.

Will there be a fixed place where visits and memorials can be focused? Will the place be suitable for prayerful visitation?

Your Catholic Cemeteries offer a variety of burial places and options for cremated remains where all this is possible. Urns can be buried in the ground in full or partial graves. Above-ground niches come in different sizes, either inside or outside, with glass, granite or marble fronts. There are other features and memorialization options available.

At a cemetery the dimension of community is expressed. A Catholic cemetery is not just a graveyard, but also a place where the living and the dead together bring about a communion of saints.

Will the cremated remains be placed in a worthy container?

This doesn't necessarily mean buying an urn. Is there a worthy vessel, beautiful and significant, already in a family's possession that could be used?

Cremation & The Order of Christian Funerals

When cremation is chosen, there are choices pertaining to the Order of Christian Funerals:

× *If the cremation is done after the Mass of Christian Burial is celebrated—*

The Church prefers delaying the cremation until after the Mass of Christian Burial. Accomplish this by renting a casket with a removable liner for the Vigil and Funeral Mass. This allows the presence of the body and all the power it conveys. The mourners might be able to journey with the body to the crematory. In any event, there should be a gathering after the cremation for the Rite of Committal when the cremated remains are placed in a cemetery or mausoleum. The cremation by itself, in the eyes of the Church, is not adequate final disposition of the body of a believer.

× *If the cremation is done before any of the funeral rites —*

Sometimes a cremation cannot be delayed until the funeral rites have been celebrated. All the rites of the Order of Christian Funerals can still be celebrated accordingly. Cremated remains in a worthy vessel are to be treated with respect and dignity because they are the remains of a human person. A picture of the deceased may be used during the visitation and Vigil, but it is not appropriate during the

Funeral Mass when the remains are placed in the sanctuary—much like a casket is closed during a Funeral Mass. Holy water and incense may be used to reverence the remains and the Easter candle would burn nearby.

※ *If the cremation and the final burial must precede the funeral rites —*

When neither the body nor the cremated remains may be present because of circumstances, a memorial gathering, often with full celebration of the Mass following a time of visitation, may be planned for family and friends to honor the deceased and to strengthen the living. The location of the burial should be mentioned.

Catholic Cemetery Principles

The Archdiocese of Milwaukee Catholic Cemeteries holds to the following principles for the final disposition of cremated remains and has enacted these specific regulations:

Placement —

The following placement regulations and general policies insure that cremated remains are buried or entombed in a place that provides for distinguishable and adequate memorialization of the deceased —

- ※ Two cremation urns can be placed in a full-sized grave, in a companion niche, or in a crypt
- ※ One cremation urn can be placed in a niche or in a partial-sized grave

General —

- ※ We do not place an urn in a crypt or grave already occupied by a casket burial
- ※ We do not recommend the placement of an urn inside a casket; this requires a separate burial service fee
- ※ We do not place urns on top of an existing burial in grave spaces
- ※ We do not place urns in any space not designated or consecrated as burial space
- ※ A cremation vault is required for all in-ground urn burials

※ An official Burial Rights Assignment Form is the best way for an original owner (a married couple exercises joint ownership) or their heirs to clearly how and by whom a burial space will be used. This Form can be completed with no charge by contacting the appropriate Cemetery Office.

In Joyful Hope

Burial in a Catholic Cemetery is an affirmation of the Christian Faith. The words of Jesus are accepted and thereby proclaimed: *I am the Resurrection and the life; whoever believes in me, even if he dies, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die* (John 11:24).

For generations, the Christian Faithful Departed of the Milwaukee area have waited in steadfast faith and joyful hope in a Catholic cemetery. These eight Cemeteries of the Archdiocese, operated on behalf of all parishes, exercise a ministry of service that continues uninterrupted since 1857. We are guided by the Catholic Church, the Archdiocese of Milwaukee and the needs of those we serve.

About Our Family Service Counselors

Our Family Service Counselors are a phone call away after sudden tragedies or prior to anticipated losses in our community. Therefore, as a requirement for employment with the Archdiocese of Milwaukee Catholic Cemeteries, every Family Service Counselor must successfully complete a rigorous training course covering the fundamentals of grief, as well as possess a thorough understanding of Christian burial practices. In addition, our Family Service Counselors participate in continuing education programs to better understand grief and trauma.

A Final Thought

Your Catholic Cemeteries, owned and operated by the Archdiocese of Milwaukee on behalf of the Catholic parishes, give witness to a faithful community of Christ's disciples — the deceased, the living, even those still-to-be-born — of all walks and stations in life.

We are committed to your family...those deceased and those living. We invite you to come — to laugh, to cry, to remember, to pray, to smile and to love.

Your Catholic Cemeteries are holy places for prayer, for memory, for service, for renewed purpose. These are sacred environments where...

LIFE is remembered,
LOVE is deepened,
HOPE is rekindled and
FAITH is awakened, renewed
and strengthened.

Archdiocese of Milwaukee Catholic Cemeteries

Holy Cross & Calvary 414-438-4420
St. Adalbert & Holy Trinity 414-483-3663
Mount Olivet 414-645-0611
All Saints–Kenosha 262-694-2040
St. Joseph–Waukesha 262-547-4927
Resurrection–Mequon 262-242-3850

Visit our web site:
www.cemeteries.org

General Administrative Offices at Holy Cross.

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BURIAL OPTIONS

Cremation and the Catholic Church



Archdiocese of Milwaukee Catholic Cemeteries

A Tradition of Comforting Concern