

Cremation in Catechesis and the Funeral Liturgy

Cremation has become a "hot" topic for the Catholic Church in the United States. The practice, discouraged by the Church for centuries and for a time formally forbidden, is now allowed. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, citing the 1983 *Code of Canon Law*, states, "The Church permits cremation, provided that it does not demonstrate a denial of faith in the resurrection of the body" (CCC, no. 2301). An appendix (*Appendix 2*) was recently added to the *Order of Christian Funerals* (OCF) approved for use in the dioceses of the United States that provides liturgical guidelines for funeral services when the cremated remains are present. Its basic premise is: "The cremated remains of a body should be treated with the same respect given to the human body from which they come" (no. 417). An "appendix" to *Appendix 2* contains "Reflections on the Body, Cremation, and Catholic Funeral Rites" that can serve as a basis for catechesis.

New Times, New Policy

On the eve of the Second Vatican Council, the Holy Office published a new instruction regarding cremation. The document *Piam et constantem* (May 8, 1963) reiterated the Church's opposition to cremation, but lifted the penalties that had formerly been attached to it:

Cremation does not affect the soul nor prevent God's omnipotence from restoring the body; neither then, does it in itself include an objective denial of . . . dogma. The issue is not therefore an intrinsically evil act, opposed per se to the Christian religion.

Piam et constantem urged the faithful to continue the practice of burial, and presumes the "good will" of those who resort to cremation. Acceptance of the practice and removal of the penalties did not, however, carry with them permission to have the cremated remains present at a funeral Mass. If cremation were to occur *after* the funeral Mass, the body could be present, but the reverse was *not* allowed.

The 1983 *Code of Canon Law* canon 1176.3 stipulates, "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." The *Ordo Exsequiarum* authorized for use in 1969 acknowledges cremation but assumes that it will not take place until after the funeral Mass.

In 1984, the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops petitioned Rome's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith and the Congregation for Divine Worship for an indult to permit cremated remains to be present at funeral Masses. The indult was granted on March 11, 1985. In the United States a number of dioceses applied for and received similar indults. In 1986, Bishop Ferrario of Honolulu was granted an indult with three stipulations. First, cremation could not be permitted for any "reasons that are contrary to Christian teaching." Second, in carrying out the practice, the bishop was required to ensure decorum that respected "current norms, both liturgical and canonical." Third, liturgical texts were to be modified to change such incongruous references as "body" to "remains."

(In response to these pastoral considerations and the numerous requests and concerns made known to them that the National Conference of Catholic Bishops in 1996 requested from the Apostolic See "an indult to permit the diocesan bishop to allow the presence of the cremated remains of a body at the Funeral Liturgy in dioceses of the United States." The Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments granted the indult dated March 21, 1997.

"In light of the special pastoral circumstances presented by the presence of cremated remains of a body at the Funeral Liturgy," the NCCB, at its plenary meeting in November 1996, approved

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modified texts and ritual adaptation that would be appended to the *Order of Christian Funerals*. *Appendix 2*, containing these texts and adaptations, was confirmed by the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments in July 1997, published in October and mandated for use from All Souls Day, November 2, 1997. The indult and the appendix make it clear that the Church's preference is still that the body be present at the funeral rites.

Liturgical Guidelines

As already noted, the U.S. bishops decided the specifics of the rite that was approved in the new appendix on the basis of the theological reflections and pastoral considerations outlined above. In the funeral liturgy, when the cremated remains are present: (1) no mention is to be made of the "body"; and (2) no symbol that is exclusively baptismal in nature, i.e., the placing of a pall, is to be used.

This second restriction was placed because it is the *body* itself that is washed in the waters of baptism and clothed in a white garment. What is present in the cremated remains is *not* the body that was washed and clothed. The bishops consulted liturgical theologians who saw no objections to the multivalent practice of incensation or even sprinkling with holy water. (New gymnasias, wedding rings, and even the ashes for Ash Wednesday are sprinkled as a blessing and do not necessarily re-image baptism.) The paschal candle, which represents Christ's presence, is also permitted.

Cremation: Toward a Catechesis

The important decision to cremate a loved one's remains calls for consultation, reflection, and prayer. The decision is not to be made hastily or without good reason. To this end, the Church has both an opportunity and an obligation to provide the faithful with the information they need when cremation is being considered. Factors other than cost and convenience must be weighed. The more people know about the process as well as the usefulness of some kind of "memorialization" as a means of managing their own grief and the Church's insistence on respect for the body, even though it has been cremated, the easier it will be for the faithful to make decisions about cremation.

The best time to plan for a funeral is well before one is faced with the immediacy of such a decision. Adult education programs, the study of liturgical rites and practices, and pastoral care in nursing homes offer opportunities to do some catechesis regarding death and burial. The vigil service that is recommended in the *Order of Christian Funerals* is another opportunity for catechetical reflection on the Christian understanding of burial and the respect for the human body even in death.

The bishops of England and Wales have proposed a rite to prepare the body that family and close friends carry out at home. Richard Rutherford suggests a similar rite be adopted in the United States. Prayers, scripture readings, lighted candles, and a reconciliation service would be joined to the washing and clothing of the body. Rutherford sees such a rite as answering the needs of those who are close to the deceased so that they might face the reality of death and bid their final farewells in a context of prayer and mutual support among the living.

From the article **Cremation in Catechesis and the Funeral Liturgy** by Mark E. Cunningham, *Living Light Summer*, 1998 Vol. 34, No. 4. MARK E. CUNNINGHAM, a transitional deacon studying for the presbyterate for the Diocese of Albany, N.Y., has long had an interest in burial customs from the perspective of pastoral and liturgical ministry.

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Cremation and Burial at Sea

Recent events have brought to the fore questions regarding the practice of the cremation of a body and burial at sea. Diocesan offices for worship might find this an opportune time to renew catechesis on these questions for the benefit of pastors and pastoral ministers.

A helpful summary of the Church's teaching on cremation may be found in the 1998 statement of the Bishops' Committee on the Liturgy, *"Reflections on the Body, Cremation and Catholic Funeral Rites."* "The Church's belief in the sacredness of the human body and the resurrection of the dead has traditionally found expression in the care taken to prepare the bodies of the deceased for burial." (OCF 411) "This is the body once washed in baptism, anointed with the oil of salvation, and fed with the bread of life. This is the body whose hands clothed the poor and embraced the sorrowing. Indeed, the human body is so inextricably associated with the human person that it is hard to think of a human person apart from his or her body. Thus, the Church's reverence and care for the body grows out of a reverence and concern for the person whom the Church now commends to the care of God." (OCF 412)

Thus, while "cremation is now permitted, 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 its rites." (OCF 413) However, "when extraordinary circumstances make the cremation of a body the only feasible choice, pastoral sensitivity must be exercised by all who minister to the family of the deceased." (OCF 414)

The rites for burial of the cremated remains of a body may be found in the appendix to the *Order of Christian Funerals*. This appendix recommends that when cremation is chosen, the body be cremated after the Funeral, thus allowing for the presence of the body at the Funeral Mass. When pastoral circumstances require it, however, cremation and committal may take place even before the Funeral liturgy.

Any catechesis on the subject of cremation should emphasize that "the cremated remains of a body should be treated with the same respect given to the corporeal remains of a human body. 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." (OCF 416)

While cremated remains may be buried in a grave, entombed in a mausoleum or columbarium or even buried at sea, "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." (OCF 416) The cremated remains of the body may be properly buried at sea in the urn, coffin or other container in which they have been carried to the place of committal. When a body, or the cremated remains of a body are buried at sea, the Committal prayer found at number 406 § 4 is used:

Lord God,
by the power of your Word
you stilled the chaos of the primeval seas,
you made the raging waters of the Flood subside,
and calmed the storm on the sea of Galilee.
As we commit the body (earthly remains)

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of our brother (sister) N. to the deep,
grant him/her peace and tranquility
until that day when he/she

and all who believe in you
will be raised to the glory of new life
promised in the waters of baptism.

We ask this through Christ our Lord.
R. Amen.

-excerpted from the *Newsletter of the NCCB Committee on the Liturgy* (July, 1999)

Catechism of the Catholic Church

Respect for the dead

2299 The dying should be given attention and care to help them live their last moments in dignity and peace. They will be helped by the prayer of their relatives, who must see to it that the sick receive at the proper time the sacraments that prepare them to meet the living God.

2300 The bodies of the dead must be treated with respect and charity, in faith and hope of the Resurrection. The burial of the dead is a corporal work of mercy;[91] it honors the children of God, who are temples of the Holy Spirit.

2301 Autopsies can be morally permitted for legal inquests or scientific research. The free gift of organs after death is legitimate and can be meritorious.

The Church permits cremation, provided that it does not demonstrate a denial of faith in the resurrection of the body. CIC, Canon 1176

Code of Canon Law

TITLE III: CHURCH FUNERALS

Can. 1176

§1 Christ's faithful who have died are to be given a Church funeral according to the norms of law.

§2 Church funerals are to be celebrated according to the norms of the liturgical books. In these funeral rites the Church prays for the spiritual support of the dead, it honors their bodies, and at the same time it brings to the living the comfort of hope.

§3 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.

CHAPTER I : THE CELEBRATION OF FUNERALS

Can. 1177

§1 The funeral of any deceased member of the faithful should normally be celebrated in the church of that person's proper parish.

§2 However, any member of the faithful, or those in charge of the deceased person's funeral, may choose another church; this requires the consent of whoever is in charge of that church and a notification to the proper parish priest of the deceased.

§3 When death has occurred outside the person's proper parish, and the body is not returned there, and another church has not been chosen, the funeral rites are to be celebrated in the church of the parish where the death occurred, unless another church is determined by particular law.

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Can. 1178 The funeral ceremonies of a diocesan Bishop are to be celebrated in his own cathedral church, unless he himself has chosen another church.

Can. 1179 Normally, the funerals of religious or of members of a society of apostolic life are to be celebrated in their proper church or oratory: by the Superior, if the institute or society is a clerical one; otherwise, by the chaplain.

Can. 1180

§1 If a parish has its own cemetery, the deceased faithful are to be buried there, unless another cemetery has lawfully been chosen by the deceased person, or by those in charge of that person's burial.

§2 All may, however, choose their cemetery of burial unless prohibited by law from doing so.

Can. 1181 The provisions of Can. 1264 are to be observed in whatever concerns the offerings made on the occasion of funerals. Moreover, care is to be taken that at funerals there is to be no preference of persons, and that the poor are not deprived of proper funeral rites.

Can. 1182 After the burial an entry is to be made in the register of the dead, in accordance with particular law.

CHAPTER II : THOSE TO WHOM CHURCH FUNERALS ARE TO BE ALLOWED OR DENIED

Can. 1183

§1 As far as funeral rites are concerned, catechumens are to be reckoned among Christ's faithful.

§2 Children whose parents had intended to have them baptised but who died before baptism, may be allowed Church funeral rites by the local Ordinary.

§3 Provided their own minister is not available, baptised persons belonging to a non-catholic Church or ecclesial community may, in accordance with the prudent judgement of the local Ordinary, be allowed Church funeral rites, unless it is established that they did not wish this.

Can. 1184 §1 Church funeral rites are to be denied to the following, unless they gave some signs of repentance before death:

1° notorious apostates, heretics and schismatics;

2° those who for anti-christian motives chose that their bodies be cremated;

3° other manifest sinners to whom a Church funeral could not be granted without public scandal to the faithful.

§2 If any doubt occurs, the local Ordinary is to be consulted and his judgement followed.

Can. 1185 Any form of funeral Mass is also to be denied to a person who has been excluded from a Church funeral.