

What Should a Catholic Know about Cremation?

The Catholic Church permits cremation. For a number of reasons the church prefers the burial of the body, but it does permit the celebration of a funeral with cremated remains.

Among the reasons in favor of burial of the body are these:

- Seeing the body confronts people with the mystery of life and death.
- The body naturally recalls stories of faith, family, and friendship, the words a person spoke, the deeds a person performed.
- Although we have virtual electronic friendships, people best encounter another person through the body.
- The body experienced the sacraments—being washed in baptism and anointed in confirmation, and by eating and drinking the body and blood of Christ in communion.
- The body is destined for the glory of the resurrection.
- The final care of the body demonstrates dignity for the whole person.
- Burial imitates the burial of Jesus' body, and thus constitutes another layer of discipleship.

If a Catholic chooses cremation, the church prefers that the final disposition of the remains be in a public place, such as a cemetery.

Many survivors make other arrangements: they retain the ashes at home, divide them among family members, or scatter them to the elements. The Catholic Church disapproves of these practices.

According to the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, the conservation of ashes in one's home is not permitted, nor may they be scattered in the air, on land, or at sea. Ashes may not be preserved in mementoes such as jewelry (*Ad resurgendum cum Christo*).

The careful placement of ashes honors the remains of the deceased in the same way that burial of the body does. Furthermore, it gives a permanent place where future generations may visit to remember, and where the person's name can be honorably etched.

The Catholic Church also prefers that the final disposition of the ashes take place as soon as possible after cremation has happened. This will protect the remains from accidental or deliberate abuse.

Some crematoriums have a place where the family may gather during the process. If a family desires to be together, they may spend the time offering suitable prayers of thanksgiving and hope, such as Psalms 23, 25, 42, 51, 93, 114 and 115:1-12, 116, 118, 119, 121, 122, 123, 126, 130, 132, or 134.

There are three possibilities for the sequence of events. Here they are in order of preference:

1. The body of the deceased is present for the vigil service and the funeral Mass, and cremation happens before the committal at the cemetery. In this case, the body may be placed first in a ceremonial coffin that will not be interred, and then removed from it for the cremation.
2. The cremation and committal take place before the funeral Mass. In this case, the cremated remains are interred in a cemetery or mausoleum, and then the mourners gather for the Eucharist.
3. The cremation takes place before any of the funeral rites begin, and the cremated remains are present for the vigil, the Mass, and the committal.

Whenever the ashes are presented in public for the funeral services, they should be treated with the same dignity and respect offered a human body. The container should be dignified, and the pallbearers should carry it with honor. Because of the compact nature of the ashes, someone may be tempted to carry it more casually. It is all that remains of a human being. It deserves respect.