

Can Catholics Be Cremated?

Yes. Cremation has been an acceptable option for Catholics of the Latin Rite since 1963. The Second Vatican Council recognized countries such as England or Japan had little land for cemeteries. also, places such as India, China and Japan have cultures where ground burial is not common. In other parts of the world cremation is necessary for health and/or economic reasons.

The Church feels that interment of the body is important because it signals the end of life on earth and the beginning of life beyond the grave. The resurrection of Jesus from the tomb stands as a symbol of the sacredness of the human body.

Current Church Legislation regarding cremation can be found in the 1983 revision of the Code of Canon Law (CC. 1176, 1184) which follows recommendations made in 1963 that cremation no longer be condemned.

Are there any conditions where the Church will oppose cremation?

The Church urges caution in reference to those who would use cremation as an expression of denial in the Christian belief in the resurrection of the body. Current Church law presumes one's choice for cremation over burial has nothing to do with hostility to Christian faith.

What liturgy is involved in cremation?

Full celebration of a Christian Funeral consists of three main rites or "stations".

1. The vigil for the deceased (first gathering to pray).
2. The funeral liturgy (a funeral Mass or liturgy of the Word).
3. The rite of committal normally celebrated at the body's final resting place.

All three rites should be celebrated whenever possible.

The Church has always expressed a belief the body should be treated with great respect and as a temple of the Holy Spirit. This is shown through the prayers and gestures used in the liturgy. Because of this reverence the Church still prefers traditional earth burial in a grave or tomb in memory of Jesus' body being placed in a tomb.

If cremation has been chosen, the Church will celebrate the funeral rites, unless there is evidence that cremation was chosen for reasons contrary to Christian belief.

What are the options to celebrate the funeral liturgy with regards to cremation?

There are Three options:

1. When cremation takes place after the funeral liturgy.

The Church prefers that cremation takes place after the funeral liturgy. This allows celebration of the three principal funeral rites in the presence of the body. It is an opportunity to show the reverence for the body through signs that have long been part of Church tradition.

The vigil for the deceased and the funeral liturgy are celebrated as usual, with a slight change. During the final commendation after the funeral Mass it is indicated that the procession with the body will proceed to the crematorium and not to the cemetery. If family and friends accompany the body to the crematorium, the rite of committal may be celebrated there. There is one more opportunity for a prayer service after the cremation: when the cremated remains are buried or entombed. However, families may also choose to have only one prayer service: the rite of committal for the burial or entombment of the cremated remains.

2. When cremation takes place before the funeral liturgy.

Sometimes cremation cannot be delayed until funeral rites have been celebrated. Sometimes the remains will be interred before the funeral liturgy. If possible, the vigil of the deceased is celebrated, with a few adaptations before cremation. A rite of committal of the cremated remains, with final commendation that usually concludes the funeral liturgy, accompanies the interment.

Friends and family then gather with the Christian community for the funeral liturgy. Such a funeral liturgy can also be celebrated when the body cannot be found, was destroyed, or when the body has been donated to science.

3. Funeral liturgy with the cremated remains present.

The funeral liturgy, including the Eucharist, may be celebrated with the cremated remains of the deceased person present., There are some conditions, namely, that the cremation was not inspired by motives contrary to Christian teaching and that the Bishop of the diocese agrees that it is pastorally proper to do so. The cremated remains, should be placed in a dignified container and set upon a small table provided for this purpose. The liturgy will conclude with the final commendation. Signs of reverence toward the body, such as sprinkling of holy water and the use of incense, may be used. The interment of the remains may then follow the liturgy or take place at another appropriate time.

What does the Church recommend for the final resting place of ashes?

The great respect the Church has for the deceased should always be evident in the way the cremated remains are treated after cremation. This means placement in a worthy container, and all who handle them should do so with care and reverence until final disposition. The Church asks, that in keeping with the spirit of reverence, the cremated remains should be buried in a grave or entombed in a mausoleum or columbarium.

There is also a spiritual and emotional benefit for placing cremated remains in a proper place of burial. It gives the bereaved and the Church community a place to focus remembrance and pray for the deceased. Such a place will make it easier to memorialize the deceased.

According to Church tradition scattering cremated remains on the sea, in the air, on the ground, or keeping them in the homes of relatives does not display appropriate reverence.