

# Catholic

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## Catholic Traditions WHAT WE DO AND WHY WE DO IT



# Cremation

## A PASTORAL GUIDE FOR TODAY'S CATHOLICS

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## Beginning with Gratitude

It is a privileged experience to remember our loved ones with prayer, to celebrate the lives of those who have gone before us, and to consider how we want to be remembered and celebrated when we die. Millions of human beings, throughout the history of the world and continuing to the present day, are never remembered or celebrated. In death, they are discarded, disposed of, covered over. Their deaths, as real as our own and that of our loved ones, are not acknowledged, and their lives are not memorialized in any way. Sometimes, this is due to poverty or war, natural disaster, or the ravages of pestilence and disease. Even as we face the discomfort of speaking about death, gratitude steadies us: we have the privilege to discern how our lives and deaths will be remembered.

## Historical Context of Cremation

The Catholic Church holds a deep reverence for the human body. Catholics celebrate the human body as a temple of the Holy Spirit and, at the time of our death, a sign of our faith in



the resurrection. In keeping with this reverence, the Church has traditionally preferred burial of the body after death.

From the earliest centuries, it was the universal practice for Christians to bury their dead, imitating the burial of Christ and affirming their belief in the resurrection of the body. Burial was seen as an act of reverence toward the body, which was, from the earliest days of Christianity, regarded as a temple of the Holy Spirit and destined for glorification. This viewpoint was in direct opposition to the

dominant viewpoint held in the Greco-Roman world. Cremation was common among pagans, who often viewed death as the final dissolution of the body and soul.

For Christians, therefore, burial became a visible sign of faith in bodily resurrection and eternal life. Cremation, by contrast, was often associated with denial of resurrection.

As the prevalent teaching and practice of the Church for centuries, there was little or no need to reconsider this teaching on burial. However,

Development of Church Teaching on Cremation		
Period	Church Position	Key Reason
Early Church to the nineteenth century	Strongly opposed	Associated with pagan denial of resurrection
1886 decree	Forbidden; consequence could be denial of Christian burial	Associated with anti-Christian motives
1917 <i>Code of Canon Law</i>	Reprobated and forbidden	Burial affirmed Christian faith in the resurrection
Before 1963	Opposition still absolute	Theological, symbolic, and historical reasons
After 1963	Gradual relaxation	Practicality, including hygiene, economics, available space; permitted it is not chosen as denial of the resurrection of the body or out of "hatred of the Catholic religion or the Church" ( <i>Instruction Piam et Constantem</i> ).

cremation became more acceptable as the Church increasingly engaged with non-Greco-Roman cultures in which it did not have to defend traditional burial practices. There was a gradual loosening of the strict prohibitions against cremation—that is, until a new perspective challenged the practice and the discipline of the Church. In the nineteenth century, cremation was especially promoted by secular, anti-clerical, and Masonic groups as a symbol of rejection of Christian belief. This perspective, a direct challenge to the Church's understanding and teaching, demanded a response, which was decisive.

In 1886, the Sacred Congregation of the Holy Office (now called the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith) explicitly forbade cremation, stating that anyone who chose cremation as a deliberate act of opposition to the faith could be denied Christian burial. The 1917 *Code of Canon Law*, 1203 §1 stated, "The bodies of the faithful departed shall be buried, their cremation being reprobated." It added that those who ordered cremation would be denied ecclesiastical burial. The Church viewed cremation not in itself as evil, but as a public statement against Christian doctrine—specifically, the resurrection of the body and the sacredness of the human form.

## Evolving Teaching and Practice

For about seventy-five years, the teaching and the practice held firm, and Catholics were not cremated. However, by the end of World War II, the Church began to recognize that cremation was increasingly chosen for practical, not ideological, reasons. Hygiene, space, and expense were among those practical considerations. Still, the official prohibition remained in place until the Second Vatican Council era.

Pope St. Paul VI's *Instruction Piam et Constantem*, issued in July

of 1963, relaxed the prohibition, thus permitting cremation, provided it was not chosen as a denial of Christian teaching. Since 1963, and reaffirmed in later teachings, the Church permits cremation with one serious provision: it is not to be chosen as a denial of Christian belief in the resurrection of the body. The key principles and rules are outlined in the 1983 *Code of Canon Law* and the *Order of Christian Funerals* and clarified further in *Ad resurgendum cum Christo* (To Rise with Christ, 2016).

## Faithful Stewardship of the Body

The Church teaches that the body after death must be treated with dignity, reverence, and care, reflecting the person's sacred worth and the hope of eternal life. To that end, the Church encourages the celebration of a funeral Mass, with the body or the cremated remains (cremains) present, if possible. The cremains are to be buried in a sacred place, such as a cemetery or columbarium. The Church prohibits practices that may reduce the remains to memorabilia—such as scattering ashes, dividing them, or keeping them at home. Adhering to these practices expresses our belief that the body—even after death—retains its sacred character and points toward our future resurrection in Christ.

**"The Christian faithful are unequivocally confronted by the mystery of life and death when they are faced with the presence of the body of one who has died. Moreover, the body which lies in death naturally recalls the personal story of faith, the loving family bonds, the friendships, and the words and acts of kindness of the deceased person. Indeed, the human body is inextricably associated with the human person, which acts and is experienced by others through that body. It is the body whose hands clothed the poor and embraced the sorrowing" (*Order of Christian Funerals, Appendix 2: Cremation*).**



## Witnessing to Our Hope

When we lay a body or cremated remains to rest in consecrated ground, we offer a public witness to our faith. We affirm that death is not the end, but a passage to life that endures in God. Burial grounds and columbaria are not only places of memory; they are places of prayer and hope, reminding us that those who have died in Christ will rise with him. (See Romans 6:8.)

## The Funeral Mass

When the funeral Mass is celebrated with ashes present, its structure remains the same as for a funeral with the body, although certain texts and gestures are slightly adapted. "In any celebration for the deceased...the rite attaches great importance to the readings from the word of God. These proclaim the paschal mystery, they convey the hope of being gathered together again in God's kingdom, they teach remembrance of the dead, and throughout they encourage the witness of a Christian life" (*Ordo Exsequiarum*, 1969). Scripture commonly proclaimed at the liturgy when the body has been cremated include:

- John 11:25-26: "I am the resurrection and the life."
- I Corinthians 15:42-44: "It is sown a natural body; it is raised a spiritual body."
- Romans 6:3-5: "We were indeed buried with him through baptism into death, so that...we too might live in newness of life."
- Wisdom 3:1-3: "The souls of the righteous are in the hand of God."

These passages reinforce the unity between death, baptism, and resurrection—even when cremation replaces traditional burial.

## Summary of the Church's Central Teachings About Cremation

- The body is sacred—created by God, redeemed by Christ, and destined for resurrection.
- Cremation does not destroy God's promise; the same God who raised Jesus will raise us.
- Cremation is permitted, provided it is done with reverence and not as a rejection of the resurrection.
- Christian death is a passage, not an end; our final destiny is communion with God.
- The funeral Mass should be celebrated, ideally with the body present; otherwise, with the ashes.
- The liturgy proclaims faith, not finality; even as ashes return to dust, we await transformation in glory.
- Ashes must be buried or placed in a sacred place, not scattered, divided, or kept at home.
- The Church invites all to entrust their loved ones to God with the hope of resurrection and the comfort of the Christian community.

## What Does the Church Teach About the "Resurrection of the Body"?

"I believe in...  
the resurrection of the body,  
and life everlasting."  
Apostles' Creed

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* clearly states what many find confusing: "It is very commonly accepted that the life of the human person continues in a spiritual fashion after death. But how can we believe that this body, so clearly mortal, could rise to everlasting life?" (CCC 996). The *Catechism* goes on to address several questions: "What is rising? Who will rise? How? When?" (CCC 997-1001). In essence, "Christ 'will change our lowly body to be like his glorious body,' into a 'spiritual body'" (CCC 999). The disposition or condition of the physical body at death will not affect the spiritual body that is raised. Cremation, decomposition, mutilation or dismemberment by violence, or the donation of one's organs after death—deemed "a noble and meritorious act...to be encouraged as an expression of generous solidarity" (CCC 2296)—does not prevent the resurrection of our glorified body. It is when the act of cremation appears to be a public denial of faith in the resurrection or the sacredness of the body that the practice is forbidden.

"If the Spirit of the one who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, the one who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also, through his Spirit that dwells in you" (Romans 8:11).



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