



**Diocese of St. Catharines**

*Where Faith Lives*

## **CATHOLICS**

## **AND**

## **CREMATION**

*Almighty and ever-living God,*

*in you*

*we place our trust and hope;*

*in you*

*the dead,*

*whose bodies were temples*

*of the Spirit,*

*find everlasting peace.*

*Diocese of St. Catharines*

*P.O. Box 875*

*St. Catharines, ON L2R 6Z4*

*905-684-0154*

When a death is imminent or has occurred, Catholics are encouraged to speak to their parish priest. The priest, a teacher of faith and minister of comfort, offers prayers for the deceased and for those who grieve, accompanying them as they face the spiritual questions and difficult decisions that often arise when facing death.

When a death has occurred, it is vital that the family, clergy, and the funeral director be in communication. The parish priest provides spiritual comfort, and assists the family with decisions about funeral rites and disposition of the remains (traditional burial or cremation), that are in accord with the tradition of the Church, and that reflect the life and wishes of the deceased.

Since July 1963, Catholics have been permitted to choose cremation for the disposition of a body following death rather than traditional burial. Prior to this, Catholics were prohibited from choosing cremation, not because cremation itself was thought to be incompatible with Christianity. Rather, the concern was that the decision to cremate might be motivated by anti-Christian reasons contrary to Catholic teaching on the sacredness of the living body as a temple of the Holy Spirit or a denial of the doctrine of the resurrection of the body.

The Church prohibition was lifted by Pope Paul VI in July 1963 through the Holy Office (now Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith) because it was recognized that a decision to choose cremation over traditional burial could be motivated by a multitude of reasons not opposed to fundamental Christian values. Since 1963, with the permission of their bishop, Catholics have been able to choose cremation “unless it has been chosen for reasons which are contrary to Christian teaching” (Code of Canon Law, 1176 §3). It is presumed that the faithful who choose cremation have the proper motives and good intentions, and so it is only in cases where a serious doubt persists about the motivation, that the Bishop’s permission should be sought.

Cremation has been permitted for Catholics for more than fifty years now, and Catholics are part of the growing trend to opt for cremation for the disposition of human remains. According to statistics from the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops (CCCCB), and Cremation Association of North America (CANA), in Canada in 1963, cremation was chosen over traditional burial for only 3.93% of funerals. By 2020, it is projected that cremation will be the preferred means of disposition of remains for 74.2% of funerals in Canada.

While recognizing this significant shift in favour of cremation, the Church still *prefers, in fact, earnestly recommends*, traditional burial in a grave or tomb as a sign of Christian faith in memory of Jesus' body being placed in a tomb. If cremation is chosen, the Church *prefers* that it take place after the three-fold funeral rites (vigil, liturgy and committal)<sup>1</sup> have been celebrated in the presence of the body.

If cremation has taken place immediately or soon after death, the Church *prefers* that all three rites of the Christian funeral are celebrated.

In March 1985, the Catholic Dioceses in Canada were granted an indult (special permission) by the Congregation for Divine Worship and Discipline of the Sacraments (Prot. 327/84), which was similar to an indult granted by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in December 1984 (Prot. 99/18). These indults insisted that the Church must show the same degree of respect for the cremated remains as for the body. This means that it is permitted to have a funeral liturgy, including the Eucharist, in the presence of cremated remains.

A Funeral Mass and not a Memorial Mass is celebrated when the cremated remains of the deceased are present in the church. A

Memorial Mass is celebrated when neither a body nor cremated remains are present.

The Church's insistence on showing the same respect for cremated remains as for the body also means that the use of holy water, incense and the paschal candle at a funeral in the presence cremated remains needs to be consistent with the use of these symbols at funerals in the presence of the body. When a funeral Mass is celebrated in the presence of cremated remains they are to be in a dignified container, usually an urn. The entire cremated remains of the person should be placed in the urn and should not be separated in any manner.

The urn is to be placed on a table covered with a white cloth, and placed where the casket would normally be. The cremated remains may be placed in the church before the funeral Mass or carried with dignity in the opening procession. While photos of the deceased have been used at the funeral home, it is not our custom to have a photo displayed with the urn in the church.

The funeral liturgy concludes with the final commendation.

Cremated remains should be buried in the earth or entombed in a columbarium or mausoleum. This shows reverence for the

deceased whose living body was a temple of the Holy Spirit. Burial or entombment also makes it easier to memorialize the deceased with a plaque or stone, and provides a helpful focus for the bereaved to remember and pray for the deceased.

Scattering cremated remains, preserving them in homes, dividing them among relatives, incorporating them in keepsakes, items of jewelry or other décor – none of these practices is considered reverent disposition.

The Church does not offer a prayer service for scattering of ashes, and liturgical rites should not accompany any method of disposition of the ashes that is not in harmony with Christian tradition. However, the first two funeral rites (vigil and liturgy) are not to be denied if such an option is chosen for disposition of the remains.

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<sup>1</sup> See the Diocesan *Guidelines for Catholic Funerals* pamphlet for more information.