

Cremation and the Catholic Funeral Rites

BY THE REVEREND CHARLES E. SINGLER, D.MIN.

*Rector of Our Lady of the Most Holy Rosary Cathedral
Director of the Office of Worship, Diocese of Toledo*

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Many adult Catholics may remember the days when the word and thought of “cremation” was never discussed or permitted in the Catholic Church. Those days have given way to the inclusion of this option and a full ritual for the final disposition of deceased Christians. As far back as 1969, the Catholic Church expressed that funeral rites were to be granted to those who chose cremation, “unless there is evidence that their choice was dictated by anti-Christian motives” (*Ordo Exsequiarum*, art. 15). At the same time, the Catholic Church has remained consistent in its teaching that the in-ground or above-ground burial of its members is the preferred custom. The general introduction to the 1989 *Order of Christian Funerals* reminds us that “it is the ancient custom to bury or entomb the bodies of the dead” and that “cremation is permitted, unless it is evident that cremation was chosen for anti-Christian motives.” Anti-Christian motives would include those beliefs or customs that promote a disregard for the dignity of the deceased and reverence for the human body.

By the time the 1989 rite was promulgated for use in the United States, the practice of cremation in Catholic parishes was increasing steadily. The problem for those presiding over the funeral rites in church was the noticeable absence of a ritual formulary that embraced this circumstance. This ritual dilemma was remedied with the publication of an appendix on cremation in the funeral rites of the Catholic Church in 1997.

According to the ritual protocol of the Church when cremation is chosen, the celebration of the funeral Mass should precede cremation. This again emphasizes the preferred reverence given to the body of the deceased. Even the prayer texts of the funeral Mass make reference to the body and not the ashes of the deceased. Yet, in practice, many Catholic families arrange for the cremation upon the notice of death and then schedule a funeral Mass and burial after the cremation of the body has taken place.

When the funeral Mass is celebrated with the ashes of the deceased member present, the ritual formulary calls for a sprinkling with Holy Water at the church entrance, accompanied by an entrance hymn and the placing of the urn or vessel containing the cremated remains near the Easter Candle, but never on the altar where Mass is celebrated. Unlike the rite when the casket containing the deceased is present and clothed with a pall, the cremation vessel remains uncovered during Mass. At the conclusion of the Funeral Mass, the ritual appendix for cremation provides an optional prayer formulary for the rite of committal.

The liturgical norms on cremation also provide us with a direction on the final disposition of the ashes: “The cremated remains should be buried in a grave or entombed

in a mausoleum or columbarium. The practice of scattering cremated remains on the sea, from the air, or on the ground, or keeping the cremated remains in the home of a relative or friend of the deceased are not the reverent disposition that the Church requires” (*OCF Appendix*, art. 417).

The intent of these liturgical directives attempts to embrace a rather difficult and painful circumstance and offer in every way possible a pastoral response that upholds the integrity of our public prayer and the profound respect and honor that should be given to our beloved dead.