

Cremation and the Catholic Church

Q: Does the Catholic Church permit the body of the faithful departed to be cremated?

Yes, since Vatican II the church does allow the cremation option under certain circumstances and understandings. In Canon 1176 paragraph 3 it is written; “The church earnestly recommends that the pious custom of burying the bodies of the dead be observed; it does not, however, forbid certain cremation unless it has been chosen for reasons which are contrary to Christian teaching.”

Q: So why is there so much controversy?

The Catholic Church has a long history with cremation. During the earliest days of Christianity those that were opposed to the new Christian religion expressed their disbelief in many ways. One of those ways was that after the death of a Christian, non believers would mutilate then cremate the body. This was an effort to prove that the Christians were wrong when they said the body and soul would someday be reunited.

In effort to combat this, the Catholic Church forbade the use of cremation as an option for the disposal of the body. The early church also believed that the body was the former Temple of the Holy Spirit and therefore should be treated with more respect than the cremation process offered. Since many of the earliest Christians were Jewish their custom of burying the dead was also followed. The prohibition against cremation was continued throughout the centuries with the exception of extreme emergencies such as the plague that swept through Europe.

Q: When did the rule change?

The rule was changed as a result of action taken during the Second Vatican Council.

Q: Why did the rule change?

During the Vatican II deliberations it became clear that many Catholics wanted to choose cremation for reasons that were in no way anti-Christian. These reasons included local customs and mores, financial considerations and lack of nearby available burial space. After careful consideration of the question, new rules were published after Vatican II that allow for cremation as long as it is not done as a statement against Catholic teachings or beliefs.

Q: Should the funeral Mass take place before or after cremation?

The preference is to have the full corporeal remains in the parish church for the funeral Mass and then cremation take place. Following the cremation the committal is done with a small prayer service. Recently, permission has been granted for the cremated remains to be brought into the parish church for the funeral Mass. This allows for the immediate committal of the remains as part of the Rite of Christian Funerals.

Q: What about the final disposition of the remains?

This is the area that has caused the most confusion and controversy. What remains after cremation are the remnants of the bones of the deceased, there are not ashes. Since these cremated remains are parts of the original Temple of the Holy Spirit on earth The Church requires that the remains be treated with the same dignity and respect with which the corporeal remains are treated. The remains must be buried or entombed and may not be separated, scattered, stored or displayed. As always the preference is for burial in a Catholic Cemetery.