

Should Catholics Cremate?

For so many Catholics—and non-Catholics alike—this remains an area of confusion and becomes a real dilemma for those who wish to follow well the traditions of our Catholic faith. I would like to offer a few reflections and, in the end, give guidance and encouragement to those for whom this question is still very pressing.

Each Sunday as we celebrate the Eucharist we profess our faith using the ancient words of the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed. The last statement we make in this profession says, “we believe in the resurrection of the body and life everlasting”. How should this central Christian belief in the resurrection of the body affect our funeral planning and the Liturgies of Christian Death and Burial? The short answer: a great deal. Until 1997, the bodily remains of the deceased were required in order for a funeral Mass to be celebrated. Since that time, however, there is now a permission to celebrate this liturgy with cremated remains present. It should be made clear, however, that although cremation is permitted, cremated remains do not enjoy the same value as the funeral liturgies of the body. The Church clearly prefers, and urges, that the body of the deceased be present for funeral rites, since the presence of the body most fully expresses the values which the Church affirms throughout those rites.

In all considerations, we must always remember that the body of the deceased Catholic Christian is also the body once washed in Baptism, anointed with the Oil of Salvation and nourished with the Bread of Life in the Eucharist. The Church constantly teaches that the human body is the Temple of the Holy Spirit, and is the honorable dwelling place of the Most High. As such, the human body is destined for future glory at the resurrection of the dead. In short, upon our earthly death, the body’s role is not yet finished or complete!

Upon the death of Jesus, the holy women took, washed and longed to anoint the sacred body of Christ. Moreover, at the discovery of the empty tomb on Easter morning, the disciples showed great concern for the body of the Lord. And at the end of the Virgin Mother’s earthly life, her body—just as dignified as each of ours—was assumed into heaven so that she would be preserved into everlasting life. Yes, the body of our earthly dwelling is holy, and dignified, and worthy of great respect and reverence, even after death. Cremation is allowed, yes; but not the preferred way to honor our body in light of what we believe.

To conclude, allow me to highlight some final points for consideration:

- ✘ The preference for all funeral liturgies of Christian death and burial is for the presence of the bodily remains of the deceased;
- ✘ If cremation takes place (which is quite acceptable), such cremation should occur after the funeral Mass and not before;
- ✘ Cremated remains must be buried or interred, *never scattered*, because the body (for Catholics) is never simply discarded after death, but rather treated with great reverence and respect in light of the future resurrection of the body.

May the Lord be gracious to each of us—in life and in death—and bless us always.

Yours in Christ Jesus,

Fr. David LeFort

