

Traditional Burial or Cremation?

The Catholic Church has always preferred traditional burial over cremation, as it better expresses the reverence and beliefs we hold regarding the human body. In 2016, the Church issued a new document on cremation, offering further explanation on this topic.

What we believe about the human body

As Catholics, we believe that the human person is made of a body and a soul, both of which are sacred. Our immortal soul is the invisible part of us which gives us life. Our mortal body is the visible part of us which communicates that life to all around us. We know each other's souls because of what our bodies show: smiles, caresses, acts of kindness, singing. St. John Paul II explained this by saying, "The body reveals the person." Our reverence for the body is expressed in the Sacraments: the body is "washed in baptism, anointed with the oil of salvation, and fed with the Bread of Life" (OCF*, 412). Even though death is the separation of the body from the soul, this separation is not forever. At the end of time our bodies will be reunited with our souls in the resurrection of the body.

Why we prefer traditional burial

St. Paul and the earliest Christians often referred to Christians who had passed away as "those who have fallen asleep" (1 Cor. 15:18). They believed that the bodies of the dead would one day be reunited with their souls in heaven, just as Christ's body was raised from the dead and ascended into heaven. Traditional burial has always been a way that Christians placed the bodies of "those who have fallen asleep" to rest until they are raised again. In non-Christian religions cremation represented either the soul being freed from the body as from a prison, or the end of the individual's existence altogether, beliefs that are contrary to the Christian faith. It is because of our deep reverence for the human body and our hope in the resurrection, that we prefer to "lay our brother/sister to rest" in traditional burial.

When we allow cremation

Though the Church prefers traditional burial, she allows cremation when the following conditions are met:

- Whenever possible, the body should be present for the funeral. It can be subsequently cremated, either immediately following the funeral or at a later time.
- The remains must be stored in a worthy vessel (an urn which is made of solid material, beautiful, and dignified).
- The remains must be buried in a sacred place, that is in a grave or entombed in a mausoleum or columbarium.
- A memorial plaque or stone should mark the place where the remains are buried.
- The remains may not be scattered on the sea, from the air, or on the ground, or kept in the home of a relative or friend. No part of the remains should be separated out from the whole, nor may they be preserved in mementos, pieces of jewelry, or other objects. These conditions are required in order to avoid "every appearance of pantheism, naturalism or nihilism" (ARCC, 7).
- "When the deceased notoriously has requested cremation and the scattering of their ashes for reasons contrary to the Christian faith, a Christian funeral must be denied to that person according to the norms of the law" (ARCC, 8).

*All quotations are from the "Order of Christian Funerals: Appendix on Cremation," NCCB, 1997. (noted as OCF) or from the instruction "Ad resurgendum cum Christo: regarding the burial of the deceased and the conservation of the ashes in the case of cremation," Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, 2016 (noted as ARCC).