

Cremation, by Fr. Kubista

Bulletin Article from February 19 & 26 Publications

Death is a stark reality, one which we will experience unless Christ comes again. As human persons, we are both body and soul. Our body will die and it deserves respect even after death. Our soul is immortal and it can experience a spiritual death. When a person dies, the body or the cremains are to be respected. The church allows cremation so what is cremation and how are we to handle it?

When death occurs the body immediately begins to decay. Today it is important to realize that death occurs when both the heart and the brain stop working. After the death of the body, sometimes there can be a special miracle which prevents the body from decaying. There are occurrences of bodies which have not decayed and these are called incorrupt. Some of the saints have incorrupt bodies, for example St. Pope John XXIII and St. Claire. The body of an incorrupt person looks like they are sleeping; no decay has occurred. An incorrupt body emphasizes the respect that is due the body and the hope of the resurrection, because through a special grace the integrity of the body has been maintained.

When death occurs, the soul, which is immortal, does not die. Our soul leaves the body and goes to the particular judgment, a judgment which determines where we go, heaven, purgatory or hell. Hell is eternity without God or spiritual death because God's life, Grace, is not present in the person. Purgatory is a purging of the effects of sin so that we are purified to see God. Heaven is eternity with God, sharing in His life through Grace. One day, our bodies will be reunited with our souls. Our bodies will share in the fate of the soul, to a glorified state in heaven or a horrified state in hell. It is a good reminder to us that what we do in the body will affect us for all eternity.

After death, the body or the cremains should be buried. Historically, early Christians preferred burial of the body. *"Christians preferred to bury the dead rather than to cremate the remains, as was common in Greek and Roman culture. The Roman catacombs and veneration of relics of saints witness to this preference. For them, the body was not a mere receptacle for a spirit that was the real person, but an integral part of the human person. They looked on the body as sanctified by the sacraments and itself the temple of the Holy Spirit, and thus requiring to be disposed of in a way that honors and reveres it, and they saw many early practices involved with disposal of dead bodies as pagan in origin or an insult to the body;"* (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cremation#Catholicism>)

One might say that cremation does not promote or emphasize hope in the resurrection of the body. If one acknowledges that the body will be reunited with the soul someday, then showing the body reverence through burial, emphasizes this fact.

The Church prefers that the body be present for the funeral but allows cremation. Typically the body, if it is to be buried, will be handled by the funeral home and the process of embalming takes place to preserve the body so that it is presentable for viewing and for the funeral. The funeral rite of the church states that the body is preferred over the cremains for the funeral.

Here is what the Code of Canon Law says: *"The Church earnestly recommends that the pious custom of burying the bodies of the deceased be observed; nevertheless, the Church does not prohibit cremation unless it was chosen for reasons contrary to Christian doctrine."* (Can 1176:§3) In the appendix of the Order of Christian Funerals (OCF) it states: *"Although cremation is now permitted by the Church, it does not enjoy the same value as burial of the body. The Church clearly prefers and urges that the body of the deceased be present for the funeral rites, since the presence of the human body better expresses the values which the Church affirms in those rites"* (OCF, #413). The Church acknowledges that there may be cases in which there may be good reason for cremation. *"Sometimes, however, it is not possible for the body to be present for the Funeral Mass. When extraordinary circumstances make the cremation of a body the only feasible choice, pastoral sensitivity must be exercised by priests, deacons, and others who minister to the family of the deceased"* (OCF, #415) Cremation is allowed but not preferred.

If cremation is done then there are certain things which need to happen to show reverence for the cremains. The funeral rite says that *"the cremated remains of a body should be treated with the same respect given to the human body from which they come. This includes the use of a worthy vessel to contain the ashes, the manner in which they are carried, and the care and attention to appropriate placement and transport, and the final disposition. 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 cremated remains on the home of a relative or friend of the deceased are not the reverent disposition that the Church requires.” (OCF, #417) We are to show the cremains the same respect that is due the body.

The cremains should be buried or laid to rest in part to show respect but also to bring about closure. The Church, in her wisdom, understands ritual and understands death. In the Code of Canon Law, here is what the Church says: *“Ecclesiastical funerals, by which the Church seeks spiritual support for the deceased, honors their bodies, and at the same time brings the solace of hope to the living, must be celebrated according to the norm of the liturgical laws.” (Can. 1176 §2.)* When one buries the cremains or a body, this brings about closure to the life of a person and this is very important especially for those who are grieving. The person who has died is laid to rest, they are placed into the ground from which ultimately they came.

We are both body and soul and so our bodies, even after death, are to be respected. We pray that people respect both the body and the cremains of those who have died. We pray for all the faithful departed, that they would see God. *Eternal rest grant on to them O Lord and let the perpetual light shine upon them. May they rest in peace. May their souls and the souls of all the faithful departed through the mercy of God, rest in peace. Amen.*