

## Catholics and Cremation

Some people do not know whether Catholics are permitted to be cremated. The answer is simply: yes, they are.

Some may remember that at one time Catholics were prohibited from having their bodies cremated. For a time that was true.

Early Christians followed the Jewish practice of giving honourable burial to the dead. They did not use cremation. These early Christians made great efforts to retrieve the bodies of their martyrs and bury them with honour, as one can see in their catacombs. In Christian countries the “pagan” practice of cremation more or less disappeared. In fact, it was made a capital offense by civil authorities such as Charlemagne through his law in 789.

In the latter part of the nineteenth century various groups introduced the practice of cremation in Europe, where for many centuries the Christian custom of earth burial had been the only way to dispose of the bodies of the deceased. The Church suspected that the motives of those promoting cremation were anti-Christian, and therefore, in 1886, the Church forbade Catholics from directing that their bodies be cremated and legislated that any Catholic who did so was to be denied a Catholic burial unless there were signs of repentance before the person died.

Cremation as such was never seen as incompatible with Christianity, but it was the motives that were suspect. When it became apparent that cremation was also being promoted by some non-Catholic groups for reasons that were not anti-Christian but rather to confront materialism and as denial of death, the Church, in 1963 lifted its prohibition. Therefore, Catholics are free to choose cremation for any reason, unless it is for reasons that are contrary to Christian teaching (Code of Canon Law, 1176 S3).

People choose cremation for many reasons: hygiene, lack of space for earth burial, economic reasons, etc. In some situations, cremation is the only option, for example, when a body is almost destroyed in a fire or when the remains must be transported any distance. If cremation is chosen for economic reasons, remember that the differences in costs are relative only. There are still costs involved in cremation. It is a good idea to ask at funeral homes about these costs, even when there is no funeral imminent.

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