

Cremation and the Liturgy

The full celebration of a Christian funeral consists of three main rites or “stations”: The vigil for the deceased (the first time the community gathers to pray and listen to God’s word), the funeral liturgy (either the funeral Mass or a liturgy of the word), and the rite of committal normally celebrated at the body’s final resting place. All three of these rites should be celebrated whenever possible.

The Church has always expressed its belief in life after death and in the resurrection through its care in preparing the body for burial. The prayers and gestures used in the liturgy show its reverence for the deceased Christian’s body, which the Church considers sacred because it has been a temple of the Holy Spirit and has shared in the Eucharistic food of Jesus himself. Because of its reverence for this body, the Church still prefers the traditional earth burial in a grave or tomb in memory of Jesus’ body being placed in a tomb.

However, if cremation has been chosen, the Church will celebrate the funeral rites, unless there is evidence that cremation was chosen for reasons contrary to Christian belief. There are three options in this case.

When cremation takes place after the funeral liturgy

The Church prefers the option of having the cremation take place after the funeral liturgy in order to celebrate its three principal funeral rites in the presence of the body; it can then show to the body the reverence it always has through the signs that have long been part of the Church’s tradition.

The vigil for the deceased and the funeral liturgy are celebrated as usual, with a slight change in the final commendation after the funeral liturgy to indicate that the procession with the body will proceed to the crematorium and not to the cemetery.

If the family and friends accompany the body to the crematorium, the rite of committal may be celebrated there. There is one more opportunity for a prayer service after the cremation: when the cremated remains are buried or entombed. Families may also

choose to have only one prayer service: the rite of committal for the burial or entombment of the cremated remains.

When cremation takes place before the funeral liturgy

Sometimes cremation cannot be delayed until the funeral rites have been celebrated. Occasionally the remains will be interred before the funeral liturgy. If it possible, the vigil of the deceased is celebrated, with a few adaptations, before the cremation. A rite of committal of the cremated remains, with the final commendation that usually concludes the funeral liturgy, accompanies the interment.

The friends and family of the deceased person then gather with the Christian community for the funeral liturgy. Such a funeral liturgy can also be celebrated when the body cannot be found or was destroyed, or when the body has been donated to science.

Funeral liturgy with the cremated remains present

Because of the 1984 indult granted to the Church in Canada by the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, the funeral liturgy, including the Eucharist, may be celebrated with the cremated remains of the deceased person present. There are some conditions, namely, that the cremation was not inspired by motives contrary to Christian teaching and the bishop of the diocese agrees that it is pastorally proper to do so.

The cremated remains, put into a dignified container that shows reverence toward the person's remains, are placed on a small table provided for this purpose. The liturgy will conclude with the final commendation. Signs of reverence toward the body, such as the sprinkling with holy water and the use of incense, may be used. The interment of the remains may then follow the liturgy or take place at another appropriate time.

Disposal of cremated remains

The great respect the Church has for the bodies of its deceased should also be evident in the way the cremated remains are treated after cremation. This means that they should be put into a worthy container, and all who handle them should treat these

remains with care and reverence in the way they are transported and where they are placed.

The Church asks that, in keeping with a spirit of reverence, the cremated remains be buried in a grave or entombed in a mausoleum or a columbarium (a place for the entombment of cremated remains), that is, in a place especially designated for this purpose and reserved as such.

In additions, a specific place for a person's remains helps focus the remembering and prayer for the deceased person by the family and friends, and by the Church in general. Also, such a place will make it easier to memorialize the deceased, for example, with plaques which record names and dates.

Scattering cremated remains on the sea, in the air, on the ground, or keeping them in homes of relatives does not display appropriate reverence, and the Church does not offer a prayer service when that kind of disposal has been chosen.

Scattering the remains in a location that was once the place where the individual spent time may seem emotionally satisfying at the height of mourner's grief, but one should ask this question: Does the desire to scatter the remains on a favorite spot display a tendency to look backward at a life that has passed rather than to look forward to a new dimension to our life with God and to the resurrection of Jesus and in life after death might suggest a more permanent resting place for a Christian's remains.

National Liturgy Office

CCCB

90 Parent Ave

Ottawa, ON, Canada

K1N 7B1