

FR. CLIFF'S NOTES

by Fr. Clifford Smith

CATHOLICS and CREMATION

Cremation may be a confusing issue for Catholics. At one time, the church prohibited cremation but this is no longer the case. The following is in answer to the most commonly asked questions and we hope this will be helpful in making your decision.

In 1963, in an Instruction from the Holy Office/Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, the Church lifted the ban on cremation for Catholics. The **1983 Code of Canon Law** states, "*The Church earnestly recommends the pious custom of burying the bodies of the dead be observed, it does not however, forbid cremation unless it has been chosen for reasons which are contrary to Christian teaching.*" (Canon 1176)

As Catholics we believe that we are created in the image and likeness of God, and that all of God's creation is sacred. Just as the body should be treated with respect in life, so should it be treated respectfully in death. From the earliest days of Christianity, cremation tended to be seen as a pagan ritual and therefore prohibited by the Catholic Church.

Cremation is the process where the bodily remains are incinerated, leaving only bone fragments and any noncombustible materials ... ashes.

The proper terminology of the remains of the body after cremation is *cremated remains*, although the funeral industry uses the term *cremains*. The Church also holds that these remains must be treated with the same respect that the body was treated with prior to cremation, including the use of a "worthy vessel" or urn for the cremated remains of the body. Remember: the body is not only created by God, but as Catholic Christians it has been the temple of the Holy Spirit.

The church generally prefers that cremation takes place after the full Funeral Liturgy where the body is present, but this is not a binding obligation. If it is not possible for the body to be present at the Funeral Mass, permission has been granted by the Catholic Church for the celebration of the Funeral Mass with the cremated remains of the body present. Since it is the 'earthly remains' and not the body of the deceased that is present, there are slight adaptations in the liturgy, such as not using the funeral pall.

The ***Order of Christian Funerals*** gives the outline for the celebration of the death of one the faithful. These rites assume the presence of the body, but adaptations are available for those choosing cremation. The Order of Christian Funerals consists of three parts:

- 1) Vigil and Related Rites and Prayers
- 2) the Funeral Liturgy and
- 3) the Rite of Committal

The "*Vigil and Related Rites and Prayers*" gives the family and friends an opportunity to gather in the presence of the deceased and offer support and prayers to and for each other as well as the deceased, and recall their Christian life. The "*Funeral Liturgy*", preferably celebrated within Mass, but which may be celebrated outside of Mass, allows us to relive the Easter mystery and Christ's promise of eternal life. The "*Rite of Committal*" is our farewell to friend or family member, as we await the resurrection of the dead along with the Communion of Saints.

The cremated remains of the body should be buried or entombed. The scattering of the cremated remains of the body, or the keeping of them at home, or the dividing of them among various family members is not the reverent disposition the Church requires or expects.