

Cremation and Catholic Belief

In the ritual book for funerals, we find the Catholic guidelines on cremation and burial: "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 body better expresses the values which the Church affirms in those rites."

Reasons for Respect of the Body

There are reasons expressed for the strong preference of the Church in favor of full-body burial. "The body of a deceased Catholic Christian is also the body once washed in baptism, anointed with the oil of salvation, and fed with the Bread of Life. Thus, the Church's reverence for the sacredness of the human body grows out of a reverence and concern both natural and supernatural for the human person. The body of the deceased brings forcefully to mind the Church's conviction that the human body is in Christ a temple of the Holy Spirit and is destined for future glory at the resurrection of the dead. This conviction in faith finds its expression in a sustained and insistent prayer that commends the deceased person to God's merciful care so that his or her place in the communion of the just may be assured. A further expression is the care traditionally taken to prepare the bodies of the deceased for a burial that befits their dignity, in expectation of their final resurrection in the Lord (Order of Christian Funerals #412).

Burial Practices

"The cremated remains of a body should be treated with the same respect given to the human body form which they come. This includes the use of a worthy vessel to contain the ashes, the manner in which they are carried, 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 in the home of a relative or friend of the deceased are not the reverent disposition that the Church requires. Whenever possible, appropriate means for recording with dignity the memory of the deceased should be adopted, such as a plaque or stone which records the name of the deceased" (Order of Christian Funerals #417).