

Catholics and Cremation

Have you heard stories about the ashes of the deceased being lost, abandoned, stolen, or even snorted? Nobody thought it would happen to their deceased relative. So, is it OK for Catholics to disperse ashes of their beloved, keep them at home, put them in a pendant, or should they be laid in their proper place of rest? To answer that question, in 2016 the Church wrote an instruction¹ on burial and conservation of the ashes in the case of cremation (all quotes below are from the same document). It seems that this document is a response to an increase of instances where the ashes of the deceased are being kept at homes or dispersed. In this way – usually unknowingly – the family ends up treating the bodily remains of the faithful departed in a way that, objectively speaking, manifests a lack of due respect in the eyes of God and the Church.

Up to 1963, cremation was not permitted to the Catholics mostly because, in some political and social, atheistic circles in the West, particularly Europe, cremation was used at times as an atheistic rejection of belief in the resurrection of the dead. Another expression of rejection of resurrection of the body comes from the East, through a belief in reincarnation. After 1963, permission was given for Catholics to be cremated as long as it was not done for reasons opposed to the faith. But, “new ideas contrary to the Church’s faith have [again] become widespread.” For that reason, the Church is instructing us about “the doctrinal and pastoral reasons for the preference of the burial of the remains of the faithful and to set out norms pertaining to the conservation of ashes in the case of cremation.” That is, the Church desires that we bury our deceased either in casket or in an urn, and let them rest in peace.

Why would we bury the dead and put the ashes in its place of rest? Jesus is the answer. We are united to the mystery of Christ’s death and resurrection through Baptism, through which He unites us to Himself, and gives us new life and access to resurrection. Therefore, Christian death has a positive meaning. Since our bodies will rise from the dead, we treat the bodily remains with the utmost respect: “Following the most ancient Christian tradition, the Church insistently recommends that the bodies of the deceased be buried in cemeteries or other sacred places.” Note that the Church ‘insists’ on burial since the burial, similarly to Jesus’ burial (Matt 27:57ff), is “the most fitting way to express faith and hope in the resurrection of the dead.” That is, we bury our dead properly because we believe in the resurrection, that the Lord will somehow unite and transform the body of the deceased to one’s soul on the day of the resurrection of the dead. Next, burial also expresses respect for and “shows the dignity of the human body as an integral part of the human person whose body forms part of their identity.” That is, a human is a body and a soul; we will rise as we were created either as a man or a woman in the same but transfigured body animated by a soul. As a result, the Church can’t “condone attitudes or permit rites that involve erroneous ideas about death, such as considering death as the definitive annihilation of the person [atheistic materialism], or the moment of fusion with Mother Nature or the universe [new-age, pantheism], or as a stage in the cycle of regeneration [some eastern religions], or as the definitive liberation from the ‘prison’ of the body [dualisms].” Of course, death, in right belief, right reason, or reality is none of those wrong beliefs. Death is a separation of body and immortal soul that will be joined together in a resurrected body of the same human person on the last day.

Furthermore, ‘a Christian burial manifests piety and respect owed to the body which is a temple of the Holy Spirit.’ Burial is a corporeal, ‘bodily’ act of mercy towards a body that is wholly God’s temple. It follows then that not to bury our dead is a refusal to show mercy to our beloved departed. Burial at a cemetery is also important because it encourages the family and the Church community to “pray for and remember the dead.” The Church thus fosters a relationship between the living and all the dead opposing the ‘privatizing’ of the event of death.

“In circumstances when cremation is chosen because of sanitary, economic or social considerations, this choice must never violate the explicitly stated or the reasonably inferable wishes of the deceased faithful.” So, the Church is not against cremation as long as the wishes of the deceased or the family are ‘reasonable’ in regards to the burial of the body or disposal of the ashes. The desires of the deceased are not absolute though. If a deceased would, for example, leave in the Will that the relative should do something that is unlawful, the relative would have a duty not to obey such a Last Will and Testament. This document states

¹ http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20160815_ad-resurgendum-cum-christo_en.html

that it is wrong, even unlawful for Catholics, to treat the body or the ashes differently than placing them in a proper place of rest. Therefore, it is reasonable and it is a duty to place the ashes in a grave or a niche at a cemetery, even if the deceased 'unreasonably' and unlawfully – at least in the eyes of God and the Church – wanted otherwise.

The Catholic Church states clearly the norm about properly dealing with the ashes, "When, for legitimate motives, cremation of the body has been chosen, the ashes of the faithful must be laid to rest in a sacred place, that is, in a cemetery or, in certain cases, in a church or an area, which has been set aside for this purpose, and so dedicated by the competent ecclesial authority." So, the Church says and teaches us that the ashes must be buried properly at a cemetery, in a sacred space. That is why the priest or deacon even blesses a grave at a non-Catholic cemetery, to make it sacred.

The Church on earth may pray for the faithful departed at the cemeteries. Thus, "The reservation of the ashes of the departed in a sacred place ensures that they are not excluded from the prayers and remembrance of their family or the Christian community. It prevents the faithful departed from being forgotten, or their remains from being shown a lack of respect, which eventuality is possible, most especially once the immediately subsequent generation has too passed away. Also, it prevents any unfitting or superstitious practices." So, the deceased buried at the cemetery are sure that people will pray for them even centuries after, and they may rest assured that their remains are being treated respectfully. Who would want to refuse the benefits of prayers when needed?

But could we still keep some ashes aside? Our Mother Church teaches us, "For the reasons given above, the conservation of the ashes of the departed in a domestic residence is not permitted. [...] the ashes may not be divided among various family members and due respect must be maintained regarding the circumstances of such a conservation." Moreover, "In order that every appearance of pantheism, naturalism or nihilism be avoided, it is not permitted to scatter the ashes of the faithful departed in the air, on land, at sea or in some other way, nor may they be preserved in mementos, pieces of jewelry or other objects. These courses of action cannot be legitimized by an appeal to the sanitary, social, or economic motives that may have occasioned the choice of cremation." That is, at times because of grieving, lack of knowledge, feelings of hurt, or other reasons, people decide to keep the ashes of their beloved at home. But we don't want our homes to become cemeteries where we keep the bodily remnants. It is common sense that we would not want to keep a hand or leg of our deceased at our home or on a pendant; why would we want then to keep the ashes at home or on a necklace? Instead, we are invited to contact our Parish or Catholic cemetery to bury all the bodily remains of our beloved as soon as possible. If we have divided the ashes among the siblings, we are invited to gather them together and also contact our Parish church to pray for the deceased and the family and lay to rest the remains of our deceased family members.

The Church is teaching us as a good Mother what is good for us so that we may pursue it, and what is bad so that we may avoid it, "When the deceased notoriously has requested cremation and the scattering of their ashes for reasons contrary to the Christian faith [as stated above], a Christian funeral must be denied to that person according to the norms of the law." If we intend to scatter ashes, keep them at home, and, in this way, treat disrespectfully the bodily remains of our beloved, we risk not having a funeral Mass or a funeral service for our beloved since we exclude our death and burial from the practice of the Church. Then, it will not be the priest who denies funeral Mass to our beloved, but instead we do, if we insist on burial practices that are contrary to the Catholic Faith.

In conclusion, the Church desires that we properly bury the bodies of our beloved or lay the ashes in its place of rest so that they may rest in peace at a cemetery awaiting the resurrection of the dead. We may not scatter the ashes, share them, or keep them at home since this does not express reverence and respect for the bodies of our deceased which are the temples of the Holy Spirit. If we choose to do so, we are doing something unlawful in the eyes of God and the Church and the family is denying the person a Catholic funeral liturgy. Therefore, to avoid creating unnecessary stress for ourselves and those around us, let us treat with due respect the bodily remains of our beloved by giving them a proper burial, and if we have any ashes at home, let us contact our Parish church to book a burial, that is, placing of the ashes at a consecrated spot at a cemetery. *Eternal rest grant unto them, O Lord. And let perpetual light shine upon them. May they rest in peace. Amen.*