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# Cremation and Funeral Liturgies

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Cremation has been permitted for Catholics for a number of years now. Most recently, in December 2017 the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, acknowledging a pastoral need, granted permission for the “Order of Christian Funerals: Supplement for Celebrations with Cremated Remains” to be used in dioceses across Canada.

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 witnesses in the catacombs. As a result, in Christian countries the practice of cremation more or less disappeared as it was deemed pagan. 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, prohibited cremation for Catholics, legislating that the practice was incompatible with a Catholic burial.

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 for reasons that were not anti-Christian, the Church, in 1963, lifted its prohibition giving Catholics the choice of cremation, unless it is for reasons that are contrary to Christian teaching. This was introduced into the 1983 Code of Canon Law in canon 1176 § 3.

Today many choose cremation for a variety of reasons, not excluding cost.

## Cremation and the Funeral Liturgy

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The importance of each of the three main services in the rites (the Vigil, the Funeral Liturgy, and the Rite of Committal) should be stressed in the planning of funerals in order that the family and Christian community may have

time to face the reality of death and draw hope and comfort in their time of sorrow.

The traditional rites help the family, friends and Christian community to enter more fully into the process of grieving. The act of grieving includes the acceptance of the reality of death, the expression of sadness at the loss of a loved one, the outpouring of love for the deceased, the gathering of a family and community around the bereaved, and the expression of faith and hope in the resurrection of Jesus as a sign of what God plans for us. This remembrance continues through the Church’s intercession for all members of the Body of Christ, both living and deceased.

Christian Funeral Rites may be celebrated for persons who have chosen to have their bodies cremated, unless it is evident that they have acted for reasons which are contrary to the Christian faith. In most cases it is recommended that cremation take place following the celebration of the Funeral Liturgy. However, it is permissible for cremation to take place before the Funeral Liturgy.

In all cases, the body or cremated remains of the deceased must not obscure the focus of the celebration on the paschal mystery of Jesus Christ and the action of God in the assembly.

## When Cremation Takes Place After the Funeral Liturgy

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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, prayers “At the Crematorium: Gathering in the Presence of the Body” may be prayed there. The Rite of Committal is celebrated when the cremated remains are buried or entombed.

## When Cremation Takes Place Before the Funeral Liturgy

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For a variety of reasons the decision is sometimes made to have cremation take place before the funeral rites are celebrated. If family members and friends gather at the crematorium, the prayers “At the Crematorium: Gathering in the Presence of the Body” may be prayed there.

The cremated remains of the deceased are to be treated with the same reverence that is given to the body of the deceased. The cremated remains are placed in their entirety in a secure vessel.

## Funeral Liturgy with Cremated Remains Present

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The cremated remains may be present during the Vigil and the Funeral Liturgy as per the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments (prot. No 327/84) and with permission of the Bishop. For the Funeral Liturgy a small table covered with a white cloth is prepared for the cremated remains near the altar. The cremated remains are never placed on or immediately in front of the altar.

The vessel containing the cremated remains may be either put on the table before the liturgy begins, or carried with dignity and reverence in the Entrance Procession. [The person carrying the cremated remains follows the presider. The mourners may follow.]

If the cremated remains are placed on the table beforehand: After the people have assembled, the Funeral Liturgy begins. The presiding minister greets the mourners informally, or with the words provided in the ritual book.

In Canada it is often the custom to place a picture of the deceased near the vessel of the cremated remains during visitation at the funeral home. During the Funeral Liturgy, which is an act of worship and thanksgiving to God, it is preferable that pictures not be displayed. Pictures can be displayed at a reception following the funeral.

## Symbols

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When the cremated remains of the deceased person are present for any of the Funeral Rites, the Christian symbols used in a Funeral Liturgy where a body is present are appropriately used here as well.

- The Paschal (Easter) candle is placed near the table as a reminder of Christ’s undying presence among the faithful.

- Holy water, a reminder to the assembly of the saving waters of Baptism,
- Incense, a sign of the community’s prayer for the deceased rising to God, may be used during the Final Commendation.
- If it is the custom of the parish to place a white pall over a casket, then a small white pall (veil) may be placed over the vessel containing the cremated remains. This is especially appropriate if the form/nature of the container might be a distraction or draw undue attention.

## Final Disposition of Cremated Remains

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The cremated remains are placed in their entirety in a secure vessel and are reverently buried or entombed in a place reserved for the disposition of the dead; that is, in a grave, a mausoleum, or a columbarium, as soon as possible after cremation has taken place (cf. Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Instruction, *Ad resurgendum cum Christo* regarding the burial of the deceased and the conservation of the ashes in the case of cremation, August 15, 2016)

Scattering the cremated remains or keeping them in the home of a family member does not exhibit appropriate reverence for the remains of the body which was the temple of the Holy Spirit. (cf. *Ad resurgendum cum Christo*). If there is a lack of intent to bury or entomb the cremated remains, the availability of a Catholic Funeral Liturgy may be a serious question.

## A Final Word

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Families are encouraged to approach their pastor or a pastoral minister regarding arrangements for funeral services before they make plans with a funeral director. Funeral Liturgies are for the living and are a vital part of the grieving and healing process. They give families and friends a formal way of remembering and saying goodbye. No one should avoid having some type of funeral service.



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This resource is approved by the Episcopal Commission for Liturgy and the Sacraments

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