

# Catholics and Cremation

## Preface

The Cremation Society of Great Britain was founded in 1874 to promote cremation as an alternative to traditional burial. Nearly 150 years later, as many as 78% of people in the UK choose cremation for their funerals. This percentage includes a growing number of Catholics. Like many people, there will always be Catholics who prefer burial. This booklet has been commissioned to help people understand the present Catholic position.

The Society expresses its deep gratitude to Monsignor Kevin McGinnell for writing this, the third edition of its booklet on Catholics and Cremation. The previous edition *May Catholics choose Cremation?* (1995) was written by the late Monsignor John McDonald. Following the reconsideration of cremation by Vatican II, Monsignor McDonald had been elected to the Society's Council in 1966 and was later appointed an Honorary Vice-Chairman. In the last 25 years, Catholic attitudes to cremation have steadily become more favourable, a change signified first by the late Cardinal Cormac Murphy O'Connor agreeing to become a Vice-President of the Cremation Society (2002-2017) and, second, by the late Bishop Michael Evans of East Anglia, being the first English Catholic Bishop to choose cremation. He was cremated in 2011 following a traditional funeral Mass and his ashes were interred in the St John the Baptist Cathedral Norwich.

Monsignor Kevin McGinnell is highly qualified to write this booklet. He is past Vice-Chair of the Churches' Group on Funerals and past Chair of the Joint Liturgical Group [GB] and English Language Consultation; in the Northampton Diocese, he is parish priest of Holy Ghost RC Parish, Luton, Chair of the Diocesan Liturgy Commission and Episcopal Vicar for Education and Formation. Eminently qualified as priest and liturgist, we are very grateful to him for writing this booklet. It should appeal to Catholics in all parts of the United Kingdom and of Ireland.

## Catholics and Cremation

### *Catholic Funeral Rites and Cremation*

When a Catholic dies, the Church responds with its liturgy over several stages

- prayers after death
- a prayer vigil before a funeral
- the funeral liturgy: this can be a requiem Mass in church, or a funeral service held in church, in a cemetery or crematorium chapel, or at the graveside
- the burial/entombment of the coffin or the cremated remains

Hence cremation is seen as a legitimate part of how the Catholic Church understands and celebrates the death of a Catholic Christian. Even where there is only a simple funeral service at the crematorium, the Church always sees cremation as leading to the burial of the ashes. So cremation itself is one part of a process and needs to be seen in that light to understand the Catholic perspective. The Church is very clear why we celebrate funerals in the way we do:

“The Church through its funeral rites commends the dead to God’s merciful love and pleads for the forgiveness of their sins... Though separated from the living, the dead are still at one with the community of believers on earth and benefit from their prayers and intercession. At the rite of final commendation and farewell, the community acknowledges the reality of separation and commends the deceased to God. In this way it recognises the spiritual bond that still exists between the living and the dead and proclaims its belief that all the faithful will be raised up and reunited in the new heavens and a new earth where death will be no more.”<sup>1</sup>

Any attempt to discuss cremation has to be understood in this wider context.

While in recent years more Catholics than before choose cremation, many still choose burial. This choice may stem from the fact that the Church forbade cremation until 1963. At the same time it is a choice that is influenced by how different cultures and ethnicities understand death. Another factor is that until we clarify the issue of burying ashes, people choose burial because the grave is a place to visit for prayer, especially on anniversaries.

## Resurrection of the Body

Every Sunday, Christians proclaim in their worship either “I look forward to the resurrection of the dead” [Nicene Creed] or “I believe in the resurrection of the body.” [Apostles’ Creed]

This fundamental belief in life after death is the inspiration behind the Catholic Christian funeral rites. A funeral is to pray for the soul of the person who has died, as well as to bring comfort to those who mourn. Prayer for the deceased is bringing them before the mercy of God and asking that indeed one day their body will be raised from the dead. For some the burial of the body fits more easily with this faith than cremation, even though we know the body decomposes in the earth. Catholics who choose cremation look to the infinite power of God to achieve the resurrection of the body even from cremated ashes. In keeping with respect for the individual’s body as a “temple of the Holy Spirit”<sup>2</sup> the Church insists that we bury a person’s cremated ashes in a specific place, just as we bury a body in a grave. This then becomes the place where we pray for and remember the dead.

## Cremation and the Catholic Church – a first move

The Vatican is the central authority for the 1.2 billion Catholics in the world. The majority form the Roman Catholic Rite originating in the Western Latin Rite, while there are also 23 Eastern Catholic Churches in communion with the Pope. These Eastern churches have their own legislation and organisation reflecting their historical development, and exist often alongside parallel Eastern Orthodox Churches which are not in communion with Rome.

Historically, cremation has been forbidden by the Code of Canon Law, the law which governs the Church’s way of life. In 1886 the Church formally rejected cremation, especially because of its early proponents who specifically saw cremation as a way of denying the Christian teaching of life after death and the resurrection of the body. This was reinforced in the 1917 Code of Canon Law which forbade cremation [n.1203] and stated that anyone cremated must be denied a church funeral [n.1240].

The first move towards permitting cremation came in a document *Piam et Constantem* of 5 July 1963. It forcefully recommended burial but permitted cremation so long as it did not deny Christian belief in the resurrection of the dead.

The 1983 Code for the Western Latin Church was revised to reflect this. The canons state that Christian Catholics who die are entitled to a church funeral so that we can support them by our prayer and offer hope to the living. Burial is seen as continuing our “pious custom”, but cremation is now a valid option unless it is chosen to deny Christian teaching. In 1990 the Code of Canon Law for the Eastern Catholic Churches followed suit about cremation.<sup>3</sup>

## The Church, Cremation and the 21st Century

On 2 March 2016 the Roman Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith<sup>4</sup> issued an Instruction *Ad resurgendum cum Christo* “regarding the burial of the dead and the conservation of the ashes in the case of cremation”<sup>5</sup> superseding the 1963 text which had hesitantly permitted cremation. While the new document underlines “the doctrinal and pastoral reasons for the preference of the burial of the remains of the faithful” its other aim is “to set out norms pertaining to the conservation of ashes in the case of cremation” [n.1]. The difference in the titles of the two documents revealed a shift in the thinking of the Church. The 1963 document’s opening words are about “the pious and constant tradition” of burying the dead, with cremation permitted as the exception. The 2016 document’s title is about “rising with Christ”, the shared hope for all who die, whether buried or cremated.

Rome recognised that changes in the world means we need to re-examine our practice. The new document has the intention “of underlining 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” [n.1]. Rather than see cremation as an exception, it is seen as a realistic alternative, reflecting societal changes and the understanding of how we reverence the dead.

“The Church raises no doctrinal objections to this practice, since cremation of the deceased’s body does not affect his or her soul, nor does it prevent God, in his omnipotence, from raising up the deceased body to new life. Thus cremation, in and of itself, objectively negates neither the Christian doctrine of the soul’s immortality nor that of the resurrection of the body” [n.4].

## Cremation and the Resurrection of the Body

*Ad resurgendum cum Christo* is a teaching text from Rome issued with the approval of Pope Francis. Its very title emphasises the Resurrection of Christ as the core tenet of our faith. Each Christian by baptism enters into Christ's death and Resurrection. "By death the soul is separated from the body, but in the resurrection God will give incorruptible life to our body, transformed by reunion with our soul. In our own day also, the Church is called to proclaim her faith in the resurrection" [n.2].

After his crucifixion Christ was buried, an imperative work of mercy in Jewish life and tradition. His burial becomes a paradigm for all Christians as a sign of belief that like Christ we look for the resurrection of the dead. "In memory of the death, burial and resurrection of the Lord, the mystery that illumines the Christian meaning of death, burial is above all the most fitting way to express faith and hope in the resurrection of the body" [n.3]. The Roman document continues to explain: "Burial in a cemetery or another sacred place adequately corresponds to the piety and respect owed to the bodies of the faithful departed who through Baptism have become temples of the Holy Spirit" [n.3].

While giving a certain preference to burial, the Church accepts that people often choose cremation "because of sanitary, economic or social considerations" [n.4].

Choosing cremation, however, must not be a choice which would "violate the explicitly-stated or the reasonably inferable wishes of the deceased faithful" or "be chosen for reasons contrary to Christian doctrine" [n.4]. The same text later reinforces this by stating that if the deceased has chosen "cremation and the scattering of their ashes for reasons contrary to the Christian faith, a Christian funeral must be denied to that person according to the norms of the law [n.8].

## Burial of Ashes

What is important for the Catholic tradition is that when cremation is 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 [n.5]. As we have said, this continues the ancient tradition for the graves of the faithful departed being the objects of the Christian community’s prayers and remembrance. Their tombs have become places of prayer, remembrance and reflection” [n.5]. The 2016 document responded to the request for clarification from bishops across the world to be clear about how to reverently deal with cremated ashes. It went on to insist that the ashes should be buried integrally, not kept at home or divided, or be scattered, “nor may they be preserved in mementos, pieces of jewellery or other objects.<sup>6</sup> These courses of action cannot be legitimised by an appeal to the sanitary, social, or economic motives that may have occasioned the choice of cremation” [n.7].

This will give rise to pastoral difficulties and challenges. A columbarium or ashes garden in a local parish church would be ideal, but these are not always available. Individual graves for cremated remains are not always available in local cemeteries. The additional cost of burying ashes too can be prohibitive. Many different practices [eg scattering] are common in the wider society so the Church’s insistence on burial can meet with understandable resistance. It calls for clearer pastoral education by the Church but this will not always reach those who are not so frequent in their church attendance.

## Cremation and Catholic Funeral Liturgy

Currently the Catholic Church uses the 1990 *Order of Christian Funerals*. If there is a Funeral Liturgy in church prior to cremation, then the service at the crematorium is a simple and brief rite of committal for cremation, parallel to a committal at the grave. Where the entire Funeral Liturgy is celebrated in a crematorium chapel, then it is an extended form of the Funeral Service with committal for cremation. The latter will normally include passages from the Bible, a homily, hymns, and a eulogy. Following these the Church then provides a service for the Burial of Ashes. In due course all these texts will be revised and hopefully those related to cremation will be more specific, as the present provision is but an adaptation of the grave burial texts. The language needs to reflect the difference between burying a body and burying cremated remains.

At the crematorium, Holy Water is always used to bless the coffin as a reminder of baptism and Christian Scriptures are proclaimed even in the shorter service. It is customary for there to be a crucifix by the coffin, that is a cross with the figure of Christ crucified, although many coffins used for Catholics have a crucifix on the top.

There is provision for the use of incense but this is often impractical, as is the use of a processional cross, or funeral pall.

Distance from the cemetery or crematorium has sometimes meant that the minister cannot be present in the crematorium. In this case committal at the hearse has been one response, but this has been felt to be very impersonal especially if no one leads any prayer at the crematorium. Should that ever happen it must be made clear how the cremated remains are returned to the family.

With reducing numbers of clergy in some dioceses, the Church has begun to train lay [unordained] funeral leaders to lead funeral services, especially committal at the graveside or crematorium.

## **A North American response**

One approach that has been permitted generally by the Holy See in Canada [1984] and in USA [1997] is for the cremation to take place without any liturgy and the casket or urn with ashes [often called cremains in USA] be brought to the Church for the Requiem Mass/ Funeral Service. This is followed immediately by the burial of ashes. There is much to recommend this practice. As a liturgy it flows easily leading to the immediate burial of ashes within the one celebration. It has many practical advantages practically in terms of the actual cremation, time at the crematorium, travel etc. Here the cremation is a physical process preparing the deceased for our religious rite. We are not yet accustomed to seeing an urn/casket as the focus for the liturgy rather than the coffin. Some may find this difficult at first.<sup>7</sup> Permission has not been given for this form of funeral in these islands presently but such funerals have occurred where someone has been cremated abroad. It is a possibility to be considered and could be introduced with sensitivity.



## Cremation and Catholic Resurrection Faith

Many Catholics are now open to the idea of cremation, others more for cultural and historical reasons still prefer burial. The recent insistence that cremated ashes must be buried, to a degree overcomes some of the hesitations to cremation. The ashes can be buried or poured into a small grave, buried in an existing family grave, or placed in a columbarium. Some churches are providing plots for ash burials in their gardens.

The committal to the earth is a powerful expression of Catholic faith in the resurrection of the dead. “To rise with Christ we must die with Christ: we must “be away from the body and at home with the Lord”.<sup>8</sup> All Catholic funeral rites then must express this deeply held belief.

“Because of Christ, Christian death has a positive meaning. The Christian vision of death receives privileged expression in the liturgy of the Church: “Indeed for your faithful, Lord, life is changed not ended and when this earthly dwelling turns to dust an eternal dwelling is made ready for them in heaven”.<sup>9</sup> By death the soul is separated from the body, but in the resurrection God will give incorruptible life to our body, transformed by reunion with our soul. In our own day also, the Church is called to proclaim her faith in the resurrection: “The confidence of Christians is the resurrection of the dead; believing this we live”.<sup>10</sup>

This understanding is celebrated by the Church in all her funeral rites and explains why she often seems to limit, indeed even forbid, some forms of personal or secular elements being introduced into the liturgy. Nothing should take away from the essential purpose of a Catholic funeral to pray for the dead. It is by doing this that we give comfort to those who remain.

By burying the body or ashes of an individual, we proclaim how each person is created in the image of God, and will return as an integral individual in the resurrection. Ensuring each person has a dedicated burial space even in death allows the people of the Church, to visit, remember and pray for those who have gone before us in the hope of eternal life, where we hope to follow.

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## References

<sup>1</sup>Order of Christian Funerals Chapman 1990 p.3

<sup>2</sup>St Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians 6:19

<sup>3</sup>1983 Code of Canon Law for the West

Canon 1176 §1. Deceased members of the Christian faithful must be given ecclesiastical funerals according to the norm of law.

§2. Ecclesiastical funerals, by which the Church seeks spiritual support for the deceased, honours their bodies, and at the same time brings the solace of hope to the living, must be celebrated according to the norm of the liturgical laws.

§3. The Church earnestly recommends that the pious custom of burying the bodies of the deceased be observed; nevertheless, the Church does not prohibit cremation unless it was chosen for reasons contrary to Christian doctrine.

Canon. 1184 §1. Unless they gave some signs of repentance before death, the following must be deprived of ecclesiastical funerals:

§2. those who chose the cremation of their bodies for reasons contrary to Christian faith;

1990 Code of Canon Law for the Eastern Catholic Churches

Canon 876 - §3. Those who choose cremation for their bodies, unless such a choice was made for reasons contrary to the conduct of Christian life, are to be granted an ecclesiastical funeral, provided that it does not obscure the preference of the Church for the burial of bodies and that scandal is avoided.

<sup>4</sup>This Congregation is the Roman Dicastery [=Ministry/Department] entrusted with defining the teaching of the Church

<sup>5</sup>The document was produced after widespread consultation across the world's bishops and in conjunction with other Roman offices including:

- the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments
- the Pontifical Council for Legislative Texts
- numerous Episcopal Conferences and Synods of Bishops of the Oriental Churches

<sup>6</sup>The document sees that some of the recent way ashes are used as evidence of "pantheism, naturalism or nihilism" [n.7] We need to recognise that a universal document takes into account the very varied understandings of religion that occur throughout the entire world.

<sup>7</sup>Anecdotally, at a military funeral in USA the ash casket was put inside a standard coffin to overcome this hesitation.

<sup>8</sup>Ad resurgendum cum Christo n.1 quoting St Paul's Second Letter to the Corinthians 5:8

<sup>9</sup>Preface for the Dead 1. Roman Missal 2010.

<sup>10</sup>Ad resurgendum cum Christo n.2. Tertullian De resurrectione carnis 1:1

**Further information can be obtained on various  
Catholic diocesan and other websites eg:**

**northamptondiocese/liturgycommission  
rcdow/funerals  
liturgy office/funerals  
artofdyingwell.org**

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