

BULLETIN ARTICLE

What guidance the church offer us regarding the proper care of cremated remains?

First, we have to start with a common understanding of what is cremation? Cremation totally incinerates the body by intense heat and flame. All substances are consumed and vaporized except bone fragments and any noncombustible materials. The bone fragments may be further pulverized after cooling. These remains weigh anywhere from 4 to 10 pounds. What we commonly call “ashes” are not really ash as we know it, but bone particles.

In 1997, the Holy See published an addition to the Order of Christian Funerals concerning Catholic funeral Masses for a person’s cremated remains. It is clear ... when cremation is chosen, “it is greatly to be preferred that the funeral liturgy take place in the presence of the body of the deceased prior to its cremation.”

The cremation instructions call attention to the care taken of the cremated remains. They should be treated with the same respect we give to the body of the deceased. The remains are to be placed in a worthy vessel which then is carried and transported with the same respect and attention given to a casket carrying a body.

Their final disposition is equally important. “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.” Additionally, if at all possible, the place of entombment should be marked with a plaque or stone memorializing the deceased.

(SR: Catholic Update: Cremation: New Options for Catholics, 1997)