INSTRUCTION ON THE CATHOLIC TEACHING ON CREMATION AND THE REQUIRED DISPOSITION OF THE CREMATED REMAINS

Diocese of Harrisburg, Pennsylvania
February 2015

In all four Gospels, we are told that following the death of Jesus, his body was taken down from the cross, wrapped in a linen cloth, and buried in a tomb that had been hewn out of rock. Ever since that time, Christians have followed the practice of whole body burial for their beloved dead.

From the *Appendix to the Order of Christian Funerals* (411), we read:

"The Church's belief in the sacredness of the human body and the resurrection of the dead has traditionally found expression in the care taken to prepare the bodies of the deceased for burial."

Again, we are reminded from that same source, why the Church expresses such care for a deceased human body:

"This is the body once washed in baptism, anointed with the oil of salvation, and fed with the bread of life. This is the body whose hands clothed the poor and embraced the sorrowing. Indeed, the human body is so inextricably associated with the human person that it is hard to think of a human person apart from his or her body. Thus, the Church's reverence and care for the body grows out of a reverence and concern for the person whom the Church now commends to the care of God" (412).

Canon 1176 of the 1983 *Code of Canon Law* states:

§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, honors 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.

Burial of the deceased body is still highly valued and is the preferred means of final disposition by the Church. This is because burial is a long-standing and pious custom and it was the way that Jesus Himself was buried following His own death. However, cremation is now permitted for Catholics, as long as the reasons for choosing it are not for reasons contrary to the Christian faith, especially faith in the resurrection of the body. Furthermore, in Catholic teaching it is clear that whenever cremation is chosen by a person prior to their own death, or by the family following the death of a loved one, the same reverence and care which would have been given to the natural body must now be given to the cremated remains.

Whenever possible, when cremation is chosen, the body of the deceased person should be cremated following the Funeral Liturgy, thus allowing for the presence of the body at the Christian Funeral Liturgy. When this is not possible, cremation may occur prior to the Funeral Liturgy. In individual cases, with the permission of the bishop (or, in the Diocese of Harrisburg, the pastor), the cremated remains may be present in the Church for the Funeral Liturgy.

At the closing of the Funeral Liturgy, the priest says to those who are present, "In peace, let us take our brother/sister to his/her place of rest." The people then leave the church together with the priest and take the deceased to the place of internment.

The *Order of Christian Funerals* (417) notes clearly: "The cremated remains of a body should be treated with the same respect given to the human body from 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."

For Catholic Christians, the final resting place calls to mind the resurrection of the dead. In addition, the burial place is the focus for the Church's remembering of the deceased (with signs of affection such as flowers, candles, and even the tombstone itself), as well as a privileged place for the offering of prayers for them (cf. *OCF* 416).

In order that the family of the deceased can make decisions in keeping with the Church's teaching on cremation, it is important that the funeral home staff inform the parish priest or deacon of the family's decision to cremate the body of their deceased loved one, and to involve the priest from the beginning and not just notify him after all the arrangements have been finalized. The priest will explain the Church's teaching on cremation to the family, and why it is important to care for the cremated remains with the same respect that would given to the natural body.

The correct teaching of the Catholic Church on cremation would include:

- cremated remains are to be placed in an urn or other appropriate and worthy container;
- cremated remains must be placed in a single container (urn) and not divided among several containers so that family members each receive a portion of the cremated remains;
- cremated remains of a body may be entombed in a mausoleum or columbarium above ground;
- cremated remains may be buried in an urn grave in a cemetery;
- cremated remains may be buried at sea, as long as they are buried in an urn, coffin, or other appropriate and worthy container (heavy enough that when dropped into the sea will be sent to its final resting place – c.f., *OCF* 406.4);
- cremated remains may never be divided so that some of the remains are interred at one location and some interred at another location;
- cremated remains may never be scattered, either on land, from the air, or at sea;
- cremated remains may never be kept in a private home;
- cremated remains may never be buried on private property, i.e., in the backyard of a relative or friend, on a farm, at a vacation home, in the woods, on the beach, etc.;
- cremated remains may never be placed into or become part of any kind of jewelry, dishes, statuary, or other types of remembrances;
- cremated remains may never, in normal circumstances, be co-mingled with other cremated remains;
- cremated remains must always be treated with the same care and respect that would be given to a deceased body.

If the family of the deceased has been fully informed of the Church's teaching on cremation and chooses nevertheless to act contrary to that teaching (for example: chooses not to bury the cremated remains, or chooses to scatter the remains, or chooses to place some of the cremated remains in jewelry for distribution to family members), then, in the Diocese of Harrisburg:

- the Funeral Liturgy, according to the *Order of Christian Funerals*, with the cremated remains present, is generally not to occur. However, the pastor may, in individual cases, permit the Funeral Liturgy to occur, due to serious pastoral circumstances, and may take part in it;
- if the Funeral Mass does not take place, as is generally the case in these situations, a Mass for the Dead may be celebrated at any time for the deceased; and
- the priest or deacon may not celebrate the Rite of Committal or take part in any other service of burial, if it concerns only a portion of the remains, or of scattering.

The reason for the above restrictions is that since a proper disposition of the cremated remains will not occur, the Church would not have permitted cremation in this case, and cannot now appear to condone their final disposition. However, the priest or deacon is nevertheless to offer the prayers of the Church for the deceased, and may not deny funeral rites to the Christian faithful except in the most serious of cases (cf. canon 1184).

The priest may also, at his discretion, hold a prayer service with the family and friends of the deceased. He may also celebrate a Mass for the Dead for the deceased at any time that, in his judgment, would not raise concerns or cause confusion among the faithful.

If the staff of the funeral home, or the priest or deacon, has any questions about the Catholic Church's teaching on cremation or the participation of the cleric in any of the funeral obsequies should the family decide not to follow these teachings, please contact:

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Given in Harrisburg on February 10, 2015

+ Ronald W. Gainer

Bishop Ronald W. Gainer

Carol L. Houghton

Carol L. Houghton, Chancellor