

# Liturgical Commission Bulletin



Supplement to *Weekly recap* (98/21), June 1998

## Capuchin funerals and cremation

In 1996, the Provincial Liturgical Commission completed a Capuchin adaptation of the revised Catholic funeral rites for the United States (1990). In the guidelines of these Capuchin rites, no provision was made for funeral rites with the cremated remains of the deceased. Firstly, there were no approved national directives at that time; secondly, there has not been an instance of cremation in the province. Since then, the United States bishops have asked for — and received — an indult on this matter (1997), and have published an appendix to the funeral rites dealing with cremation. After studying the directives, the commission decided *to air the matter for wider discussion*.

Cremation of the bodily remains of the deceased is a growing practice in the funeral culture of the United States. Estimates indicate that cremation follows in more than 20% of deaths in this country, and there is steady growth. The columbarium (or special structure for the reposition of cremated remains) is now a quite standard feature in cemeteries. Cremation is practiced more often in non-church related burials than in church burials, although it is widely present in both.

There are many reasons given for cremation, not all of which would be regarded as compatible with Christian faith, or culturally healthy. However, the reason most often given is *cost*. While there are many variables, it is estimated that costs can be as low as one-fourth of the customary funeral if the body is cremated soon after death. Eliminated are the usual costs of embalming the body, cosmetic treatment, casket, use of funeral parlor, and full grave. When death or burial is distant, there is considerable saving on

airfare by transporting the cremated remains rather than the body in a casket.

There are also reasons of *ecology*: a vase takes up less space than a casket in a crowded world. There are reasons of *health*: it seems a more sanitary way of disposing of the remains of the deceased, and is cited as a necessity in some cases of infectious disease. And some people may not desire to have their bodily remains placed on view for the mourners (sometimes the reason behind a closed casket, although a disfigured body is more often the reason). These are just some of the more prominent reasons why people choose cremation in the culture of the United States. (There are more prominent and even religious reasons in other cultures.)

The Catholic Church's historical opposition to the practice of cremation is well known, viewing it as a denial of the doctrine of the resurrection of the dead and the immortality of the soul. Mainly in response to the cultural and pastoral situation of some non-western countries, *the Catholic church relaxed its strict prohibition of cremation in 1963*, as long as it was not chosen for reasons contrary to the faith. The church continued to maintain a strong preference for burial of the intact body, but with allowance for cremation, preferably after the funeral liturgy (or eucharist) had taken place. This same position was then incorporated into the revised funeral rites for the entire Catholic Church (1969), the new code of canon law (1983), and the revised Order of Christian Funerals for the United States (1990).

Accordingly, since 1963, it has been possible for Catholics to have their bodies cremated. The *preferred manner* of accommodation to cremation, however, has been to celebrate the funeral rites with the intact body. After the funeral liturgy (the eucharist) the body could be cremated. At a later time a committal service (the grave side or cemetery service) could be held when the cremated remains were deposited. In this

scenario, the full rites of the church could be celebrated, and the body could be cremated.

*What was not provided for officially was celebration of the full funeral rites when the body had already been cremated.* The rites provided only for a committal service at the columbarium (for instance), with a later memorial mass for family and friends (memorial mass is the technical name for a mass celebrated for the deceased without the presence of the body). This meant no vigil or wake service and no funeral liturgy (the celebration of eucharist in the presence of the body). As the practice of immediate cremation increased among Catholics, the pastoral strain began to grow. Families felt they were being penalized or shortchanged for a choice often made by the deceased person, or made for reasons of cost or distance; pastors felt they were not responding adequately to the needs of the mourners. So, here and there, pastors improvised, and eventually some dioceses issued their own provisions for funeral rites in the presence of the cremated remains. Eventually the collective body of U.S. bishops asked for full funeral rites in the presence of the cremated remains, and in 1997 this was granted at the discretion of each individual bishop. (In all such matters the Holy See customarily avoids any official recognition of a national episcopal body).

All the official Catholic documents on funerals and cremation (papal, national, and liturgical) indicate a *massive preference for the traditional practice of intact bodily burial*. At one time in history part of the reason may have been a very literal understanding of the biblical teaching on the resurrection of the dead, which forbade any tampering with the remains of the deceased and stood as an obstacle to the development of medicine. Contemporary teaching has other reasons.

Foremost would be *the dignity of the human person*, a touchstone of contemporary church teaching in so many ways. This concern covers the whole

sweep of human life, and finds an echo in the practice of intact bodily burial. It is not that cremation is considered a disrespectful way of treating the body; rather, the burial of the intact body is considered the preferred way, as more fully consonant with the dignity of the human person.

A second reason is *the dignity of the Christian*, whose body was sacramentally washed, fed, and anointed in his or her lifetime as the temple of the Holy Spirit. Even in death the remains of the person are treated with dignity, washed and clothed and carefully laid to rest. The bodily remains retain their sacramental value, which is why they are brought into the assembly of the eucharist.

A third point would be *the value of the intact body in the process of mourning*, as people experience grief and loss and move through the process of letting go. The church has a ritual extended over time to help people move through this process, from the time of death to the time of burial. The body is a focal point religiously, psychologically, and sociologically, as people move through this process. It is not yet clear whether the presence of cremated remains can adequately fulfill this role. Reports from pastoral experience raise the question whether the cremated remains can provide an adequate focus for the process of mourning, and indicate that some mourners are still uncertain or uncomfortable in such a situation. And a larger question is whether cremated remains convey the reality of death as well as the corpse in a casket, or hide it to some extent.

(Parenthetically, this discussion does not endorse the many death denying practices of the funeral culture of the United States. It was probably a far healthier situation in the last century when friars washed and clothed and prepared their own dead for burial, and probably dug the grave, as well. The relegation of all this to outside specialists, first the undertaker or grave digger (now with

artificial grass to cover the dirt), then the mortician (embalming and cosmetic treatment), and finally the funeral director (taking charge of everything) has resulted in a cultural loss of being in touch with death, and greater difficulty in dealing with death. The growing tendencies to omit the trip to the cemetery, or to use a cemetery chapel rather than pray at the actual grave side, can also be seen, not simply as more convenient, but to some extent, the avoidance of looking death in the face. The natural result in our specialized society is the later resort to specialists in grief and loss to make up for the lack of ritual and the inability of kinship and friendship to assist in that process.)

Accordingly, while providing for cremation, all the documents continue to express a *strong preference for leaving the body intact until after the funeral liturgy*. Then the body could be taken away for cremation, if so desired. At a later time, there could be a committal service at the place of deposition of the cremated remains. (This practice effectively negates all the cost savings of cremation.)

What is new in the 1997 directives is *full provision for all the funeral rites in the presence of the cremated remains*, in those cases where cremation has preceded the funeral rites. There are small adaptations of ritual (no pall) and language, as needed. The cremated remains can be sprinkled with holy water and incensed, they can be carried in procession, they are buried or entombed with the full ritual of the church.

The directives also provide a *Catholic pastoral framework for cremation*. It marks a distance from some practices of cremation in the culture of the United States:

*“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. 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. Whenever possible, appropriate means for recording with dignity the memory of the deceased should be adopted, such as a plaque or stone which records the name of the deceased.”* (Order of Christian Funerals, Appendix on Cremation, no. 417)

Finally, *where does this leave us, as Capuchins?* In recent years some friars have expressed the desire to have their bodies cremated. Good arguments can be made that this is a matter of personal decision, to be respectfully carried out. Arguments can also be made that this affects all of us and needs more collective discernment, at least through our elected representatives, especially the provincial minister, who is the “pastor” personally or through delegation for each of the friar’s funerals.

If a friar does wish to have his body cremated, how is this to be expressed? Is it entered into his personnel record, along with any other funeral wishes? Does it need ratification from someone?

If, indeed, a friar’s body is to be cremated, should we wait until after the funeral rites, as the directives strongly suggest? This gets into the issue of cost. While money saved can always be directed elsewhere, the province, as such, does not seem to lack the funds to carry out customary funerals. It is not a matter of monetary hardship. We have had some deaths involving considerable air transport. Should cremation be considered in those cases?

As to use of land, it would seem that we have adequate cemetery space set aside for intact body burial of the friars, and it is land that would not be used for other purposes. Even in the case of cremated remains, it would be reasonable to use a

full plot for burial with headstone as customary. The construction of a columbarium or special house for cremated remains would be seen as an unnecessary extravagance.

*In conclusion*, the purpose of this presentation is to air the issue for reflection and discussion, as well as to invite responses and other points of view. Does cremation have a place in Capuchin funerals? In what ways do we have funeral rites for the sake of the deceased? In what ways do we have funeral services for the sake of the living? What does faith say? What does culture say? And are these reconcilable? There is room here for pondering both individually and collectively, as we continue to bury our dead with care and concern, and as each of us prepares for that inevitable time.

Provincial Liturgical Commission  
(as per Ken Smits)  
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