

Death and Care for the Body

Questions and Answers from a Catholic Perspective

When it comes to death and the issues surrounding burial and cremation, there are many questions which may be on the minds of Catholics. Many are grateful for having some direction and guidance particularly when it comes to such sensitive issues. What follows is a brief series of questions and answers regarding the beliefs and requirements of the Church regarding death and care for the body.

At the time of death, and the soul leaves the body, is my loved one “gone?”

Some people feel that their loved one is “no longer here” following death. This is understandable but it is inaccurate. The truth is that we human beings are BOTH body and soul and we remain body and soul even at the time of death. Yes, the soul has passed from this world to the next, but at the end of time our bodies will be united again with our souls. That is what happened with the bodily resurrection of Jesus and that is what we ourselves long to experience.

What funeral rites are recommended following death?

The Church recognizes the profound sense of sadness that can often accompany the death of a loved one. For this reason, family and friends are encouraged to take full advantage of the three separate rites associated with a Catholic funeral. These include a vigil or rosary (the night before), funeral Mass, procession and burial of the body at one of our three Catholic cemeteries. Your pastor will be flexible in meeting your individual needs and circumstances.

What about cremation?

The Church clearly prefers that the body be present for the funeral rites. The human body is sacred. During life, the body is a temple of the Holy Spirit. It is washed in Baptism, anointed with sacred oil in Confirmation and nourished with the Body and Blood of Christ in Holy Communion. The body is an instrument of charitable relationships and compassion shown toward people. In death, the body is therefore to be shown dignity and reverence.

Even if cremation is to take place, the Church encourages the body to be present for the Vigil and Funeral Mass.

How does that work?

Funeral home representatives can speak with you about using a combustible liner in a rented casket. Following the funeral Mass, the body remains in the combustible liner, is removed from the casket, and both are cremated together. Following cremation, the remains are then inurned in a cemetery niche or consecrated ground plot.

Is there a difference in how the body is treated compared with ashes?

In a situation where the body is cremated before the funeral rites, the cremated remains may be present for the funeral rites. It is important to note that the remains are to be treated with the same respect we give to the human body. Treating the cremated remains exactly as we would the body means that we place them in a worthy vessel, transport them with dignity, and entomb them in a mausoleum or bury them in a grave. They are not to be scattered in the park, distributed among friends, or poured into a favorite lake. Our focus is on eternal life and caring for the remains as we would the body points to Jesus Christ and our hope for resurrection.

If incineration cremation is allowed by the Church, what about alkaline hydrolysis or composting?

Alkaline hydrolysis, sometimes called flameless cremation, is an increasingly popular cremation process which uses a chemical solution to reduce the human body to a liquid and bones. After the body has been “bathed” in the chemical solution for a few hours, the process is completed, leaving behind about 100 gallons of sterile liquid and bone fragments. The liquid solution is disposed of through the sewer system while the bone fragments are then pulverized into dried paste and returned to the family.

Alkaline hydrolysis is legal in Washington State. However, the process does not show due reverence and respect for the body of the deceased, particularly as the dissolved human remains are flushed into the sewer system.

Human composting is also legal in Washington State. During the human composting process, a body is placed in a reusable vessel, covered with wood chips, and aerated. This creates an environment for microbes and essential bacteria to decompose the body. In about 30 days, the body becomes usable soil.

Because the process does not fully respect the dignity of the human body, the Church does not support the use of human composting. The body has greater dignity than banana peels, coffee grounds, or garden scraps.

How do I plan my funeral rites?

Call your parish and speak with your pastor. It is very helpful if a person plans his or her funeral rites in advance and then communicates that plan with friends and loved ones.

Who should give my eulogy?

It is important to note that the entire focus of Catholic funeral rites is on Jesus Christ -first and foremost. If a personal eulogy is to be given, it is preferred to reserve it for the memorial reception. The funeral rites are meant to turn our attention to Jesus Christ as our savior and victor of sin and death. Without His triumph over the grave, there would be no hope for any of us. Funerals allow us to worship the Lord and ask for his loving mercy and kindness to be shown to the person who has died.

When the focus remains on Jesus Christ, the funeral rites often become a source of evangelization for those in attendance and comfort for the person's family and loved ones.

What about a celebration of life?

Remembering and honoring aspects of our deceased loved ones is very important. Sharing memories and humorous anecdotes helps with the grieving process. It is most appropriate to use terms like "memorial reception" or "memorial luncheon" rather than "celebration of life." As was indicated above, the only life to be "celebrated" is our Lord Jesus Christ. Funeral terminology helps to keep our focus on salvation and the life that is to come.

Some of this information is new to me. What if I didn't follow it in the past?

There are those who will read this information and have some feelings of guilt for choices made in the past. Many of us have regrets about certain decisions we have made regarding dying, death, and burial issues. Let's just leave that in the past and entrust it to the mercy of God. Looking forward, we strive to live the teachings of our Church when faced with similar situations in the future.