

## The Psychological Importance and Comfort of Funeral Rituals

Dr. Alan Wolfelt, noted author, educator and grief counsellor, speaks about today's society as being death-denying and mourning-avoiding in his article "Why is the Funeral Ritual Important?". For the Catholic Church, this change in societal values has become problematic when it comes to following centuries-old accepted rituals when someone dies. The trend today is towards speed and efficiency in saying good-bye to our loved ones who die. More and more, people are opting for direct cremation and, sometimes, no service to acknowledge the life and death of an individual.

Dr. Wolfelt tells us that all of his research and other studies support the importance of funeral rituals and ceremonies, especially when the body of our loved one is present, in helping us to acknowledge the reality of death. It gives testimony to the life of the deceased and encourages the expression of grief. Funerals also provide opportunities to support those who are mourning and to allow for the embrace of faith and beliefs about life and death. He believes that individuals, families and society itself will suffer if we do not reinvest in the funeral ritual.

When someone dies, we must openly acknowledge the reality and finality of death if we are to move forward with our grief. Viewing the body helps us to acknowledge that the person has died. Acknowledging a death helps us to embrace the pain of the loss. We need to do this if we are going to heal. It is very difficult to distance yourself from the pain of grief when you see the body in a casket at the visitation or in the Church at the funeral. These are accepted venues for expressing painful feelings and outward expressions of sadness are condoned.

For individuals who have lost a loved one, properly acknowledging and mourning the death, with a funeral ritual with the body present, is the first step on the path to living a full and healthy life without their loved one.

## Why Choose Cremation?

While the Church prefers that Catholics would choose burial, there are many reasons why cremation is preferred:

- *Cost – Simple cremation can cost less than a funeral*
- *Cremation plots use less cemetery space*
- *Environmental impacts – Cremation is considered in some ways to be more ecologically friendly.*

It is always a good idea to have a discussion about burial or cremation with your family and loved ones before a death occurs so that everyone has an opportunity to have their say on this issue.

Whatever your decision about the burial or cremation of yourself or your loved ones, we welcome you to have this discussion with the knowledgeable and professional staff at Kearney Funeral Services who will be happy to assist you in fulfilling your wishes.

We also encourage you to seek the advice and guidance of your Parish Priest if you have questions about burial, cremation and Catholic funerals.

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Catholics  
&  
Cremation

"... for you are dust and to dust you shall return."  
- Genesis 3:19

*The way our society views death and the manner in which we honour a loved one who has died have evolved over time. It is helpful to understand the Church's approach to funerals, for the sake of our own bereavement and the good of our faith.*

## What the Church says about the human body

Catholics believe that one day we will be raised up body and soul to a new life with Christ. The Church followed through with our Jewish heritage of not cremating the deceased. It is a visible sign of our expectation that the body, like Christ's, will be resurrected.

The 1983 Code of Canon Law reflects our current understanding of cremation and its acceptance in today's society:

*"The Church earnestly recommends that the pious custom of burial be retained, but it does not forbid cremation, unless this is chosen for reasons that are contrary to Christian teaching." (Canon 1176)*

The Catechism of the Catholic Church, which details Church teaching on many issues, confirms that this is the case:

*"...the Church permits cremation, provided that it does not demonstrate a denial of faith in the resurrection of the body." (no. 2301)*



## Church Guidelines:

In 2017, the Vatican issued new guidelines on the issue of cremation:

- *A Funeral Mass must be held with traditional funeral rites. The full body of the deceased must be present in the Church during the Funeral Mass. Cremation would take place after the Mass.*
- *Cremated remains are not to be scattered or divided among family members. This is to preserve the sanctity of the body. The cremated remains must be treated in the same way that a body would be and kept in a sacred place: "Burial in a Catholic cemetery or other sacred place is above all the most fitting way to express faith and hope in the resurrection of the body."*

And this is from the Guidelines for Funerals and Burials in the Catholic Church in the Dioceses of BC and the Yukon:

- *It is strongly discouraged to hold the funeral Mass with only the cremated remains present.*

The Church maintains that the funeral ceremony should be performed with the body intact before the cremation takes place. However, it realizes there are special instances that are the exception.

According to the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops, it is permissible for the cremated remains to be present during the Vigil and the Funeral Liturgy.

*"It is the priest's responsibility to verify the proper motivation and to determine that those arranging for the funeral have made satisfactory provision for the cremated remains, preferably in a Catholic cemetery."*



## Why is it Essential to Pay Reverence to the Body of our Loved Ones?

The Catholic Church recognizes the psychological benefits for families and loved ones of viewing the body and having it present for the Funeral Mass.

It is comforting to those who mourn to witness the age-old traditions of having their loved one present at the front of the Church during the Funeral, in his or her recognizable bodily form, the temple of their immortal soul, with the customary rituals of placing the pall on the casket, the sprinkling of Holy Water, the burning of incense and listening to familiar prayers and hymns. (The smoke of the burning incense is seen as a symbol of the prayers of the faithful during the Funeral rising to Heaven and reverencing their loved one.)

In expressing our grief, it is most spiritually beneficial that we do this in our place of worship. It is here where you are supported and held up by others who share your loss. The love and compassion of those around you will help you to go on to find meaning in life and living. However, cremation in no way inhibits God's plan of raising us to new life and, given contemporary societal practices, the Church now permits cremation.

