

A Time to Reflect....

Recently a former parishioner who lives in Ohio came to visit and during the visit wanted to pay her respects at the grave of two former parishioners who had died in the past two years. Because of the distance, she was not able to attend the funerals of these very good friends. As we stood at the grave and reminisced, I was struck by how much these people meant to her and as we prayed together, I realized how important this brief time was for her in the grieving process for her friends. I found it to be healing. This, to me, is a significant reason why we bury or entomb the body or remains of someone who has died. Another reason is that the Church also asks that the body or remains of the deceased be buried.

As we stood there, my friend said that she was going to be cremated. This didn't surprise me because since 1963, when the Church gave permission for cremation, many people are taking this option. For so long, the Church did not permit cremation because of its connection with ancient pagan burial customs. There were also many who did not have a belief in the resurrection of the body, which is foundational to our belief. Cremation and a denial of the resurrection of the body do not necessarily go hand in hand and so the Church now permits cremation. Because of the great reverence the Church has for the body, which we consider a temple for the spirit and soul of each individual, the Church asks that the cremation of the body take place **after** the funeral mass so we can appropriately honor the body of the deceased. The remains of the individual are then cremated and the cremains must receive a proper burial or be placed in a cremain niche in a mausoleum. My friend was very happy when she heard this!

The Church also relaxed its rules in 1997 to allow cremains to be blessed during the funeral mass. It is important to note that for some pastoral reasons cremation may take place before the funeral. There may be many reasons which involve things like transporting the body for burial which can be costly, needing extra time to gather all the family together to celebrate the funeral, and I am sure there are more. Any questions concerning this can be discussed with the parish priest. When the cremains of an individual are present at the funeral mass, most of the prayers are the same but some of the rich symbolism concerning Baptism (use of the white pall symbolizing the white garment of Baptism), and the use of incense cannot be used. I think the Church is trying to make accommodations to be of assistance to the family at a most difficult time.

The early Christians never cremated their dead because that is what the pagans did. They always buried their dead. The catacombs in Rome have such beautiful Christian symbols concerning the faith of those who were buried there. That same faith which has been handed down to us should move us to treat the cremains of our loved ones with reverence and deep respect. I know that the death of a loved one can be a very traumatic event and the grief one experiences may seem insurmountable but with our trust in God we can receive the consolation that comes from God alone. It may seem hard to hear, but for Catholics the scattering of ashes here and there, or keeping them somewhere in the home are not permitted. Many people may be doing this but that does not make it the right thing to do. We have seen the remains of some notable Catholics being spread at sea. Again, this does not make it correct.

We believe that there is something more after this life. We pray for this, we live for this, we hope for this! Our funeral ritual can and does assist us.

Fr. Rich