

Instruction Regarding Cremation

Introduction

Some priests have inquired what the procedures should be regarding the funeral of those faithful who wish to be cremated. The concept of cremation is seldom if ever, considered by Christians in Lebanon and the Middle East and, as such, to this date, has not been discussed by the Maronite Synod. In the United States it is an issue, which we must realistically deal with in an appropriate manner. The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, of which the Eastern Catholic Bishops belong, has issued a directive on Cremation, which was approved by the Holy See in 1997. Although the liturgical particulars of that document apply only to the Latin Church, its general principles are very pertinent to us. Excerpts of these norms are listed below and hopefully can be of great assistance in dealing with this issue in a practical and pastoral way in our own Eparchy.

The Dignity of the Human Body

The body that lies in death “brings to mind our belief that our human bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit (I Cor. 6:19), destined for future glory at the resurrection of the dead.” That body “recalls the personal story of faith... of the deceased person... for it was 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... The Church’s belief in the sacredness of the human body and the resurrection of the dead had traditionally found expression in the care taken to prepare the bodies of the deceased for burial.”

Cremation

Catholic belief “reflects a theology and a tradition in which burial (interment or entombment) of the body has been the principal manner of the body’s final disposition. The long-standing practice of burying the body of the deceased in a grave or tomb in imitation of the burial of Jesus’ body continues to be encouraged as a sign of Christian faith. However, owing to contemporary cultural interaction, the practice of cremation has become part of Catholic practice in the United States and other parts of the Western world... Although cremation is now permitted, it does not enjoy the same value as burial of the body. Catholic teaching continues to stress the preference for the burial or entombment of the body of the deceased.”

The Funeral

“The Church clearly prefers and urges that the body of the deceased be present for its funeral rites, since the presence of the human body better expresses the values” of the Church. As such, it is preferred that the cremation of the body of the deceased, take place after the final rites in the church and before the committal. “Sometimes, however, it is not possible for the body to be present for the funeral liturgy. While promoting our preference for burial of the body, we must exercise sensitive pastoral judgment concerning the choice that... our people are making in favor of cremation.”

Practical Considerations

In light of what has been stated above, it is highly recommended that cremation take place *after* the funeral liturgy. However, due to particular circumstances, when the body cannot be present, “it is appropriate that the cremated remains of the body be present for the full course of the funeral rites, including the Vigil for the Deceased, the Funeral Liturgy, and the Rite of Committal. The funeral liturgy should always be celebrated in a church (not in a funeral home or cemetery chapel). The cremated remains of the body should then be reverently buried or entombed in a cemetery or mausoleum... The remains of cremated bodies should be treated with the same respect given to the corporeal remains of a human body. This includes the manner in which they are carried, the care and attention to appropriate care and transport, and their final disposition... The practices 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.” A blessed grave or other dignified place in a cemetery is appropriate. Burial at sea, of an *intact* urn containing the cremated remains of the deceased, is permitted but should take place with the proper prayers of committal. “Whenever possible, appropriate means for memorializing the deceased should be utilized, such as a plaque or stone that records the name of the deceased.”