

32nd Sunday in Ordinary Time

Last month the Vatican issued a new statement about cremation. It repeats many points already in force. But I will review these with you because the statement is new, because we just celebrated All Souls Day, and because November is a month in which we especially pray for the faithful departed.

Many people choose cremation for themselves or their loved ones not only in our country but throughout the world. The Catholic Church permits cremation if it has not been chosen to deny belief in the resurrection of the body (as the Sadducees do in today's gospel) or to express a hatred for the Church. Other factors motivate many people to choose cremation: For example, it costs less; it provides flexibility in choosing the date for a funeral; and it creates more options for a final resting place.

A traditional Catholic funeral unfolds in three stages: a wake service either at church, in a funeral parlor, or in the home of the deceased; then a funeral mass; and finally a ceremony at the cemetery. However, the popularity of cremation comes at a time when many people are looking for expedient solutions to complex problems, including shortening the funeral to two stages or even one.

Many people who survive the loss of a loved one are taking the final disposition of the ashes into their own hands. They are pouring them on the ground, launching them into space, scattering them over the ocean, placing them on mantelpieces, dividing them among family members, or encasing them in jewelry. The people making these decisions surely feel loss and love, along with a desire either to make irretrievable the remains of the deceased or to keep them close at hand. By contrast, in cemeteries the dead form their own community, where present and future generations can pay homage to deceased relatives and friends. This divergence has prompted the Vatican to restate church teaching pertaining to cremations. Here are some excerpts from the new Instruction *Ad resurgendum cum Christo* regarding the burial of the deceased and the conservation of ashes in the case of cremation.

“The ashes of the faithful must be laid to rest in a sacred place, that is, in a cemetery or, in certain cases, in a church or an area, which has been set aside for this purpose, and so dedicated by the competent ecclesial authority.... [This] ensures that they are not excluded from the prayers and remembrance of their family or the Christian community. It prevents the faithful departed from being forgotten, or their remains from being shown a lack of respect” (5). “The conservation of the ashes of the departed in a domestic residence is not permitted.... The ashes may not be divided among various family members” (6). “It is not permitted to scatter the ashes of the faithful departed in the air, on land, at sea or in some other way, nor may they be preserved in mementos, pieces of jewelry or other objects” (7).

The Vatican's directives respect each human life, encourage an appropriate place where future generations may honor the dead, and affirm our belief in the resurrection. If anyone has ashes at home that you would like to place in a cemetery, Deacon Tom or I would be honored to accompany you with our prayers.