

## *All Souls Day*

Almost 50% of all the people who die in the United States are now cremated. The Catholic Church permits cremation, but it clearly prefers burial of the body. We believe in the resurrection of the body, so we believe that the body deserves special respect at the time of death. Our belief is founded on the scriptures. St. Paul writes to the Philippians in the passage we hear today, the Lord Jesus “will change our lowly body to conform with his glorified body.” Customarily on the night before a funeral we place the body on view. When Christians see the body of one they loved, they immediately recall personal stories of faith, family and friendship. This is the body that was baptized, confirmed, and fed the eucharist. It brings us face to face with the mystery of life and death. When we bury another Christian, we imitate the burial of Jesus. He was laid in a tomb. As he rose from the grave, he made it possible for us to rise from our graves as well. In the Catholic Church we value the burial of the body.

In the past the Catholic Church did not permit cremation because it seemed as though burning the body showed disrespect for it. Now we realize that people choose cremation for other reasons. Some choose it in order to save money or to provide convenience, which may not be the noblest of reasons.

The Catholic Church permits the funeral mass of a cremated person in three different ways. The preferred method is to delay cremation and have the body placed in a coffin for the mass. A second option is for both the cremation and the committal to take place first, and then have a mass. A third option is to have the ashes present for the funeral mass.

Some Catholics choose something else: not committing the cremated remains to a permanent place such as a mausoleum or a cemetery. Instead they keep the ashes at home, or they sprinkle them over some previously selected location. Others place some of the ashes in a locket. Even though these practices are widespread, the Catholic Church discourages them. It says that these methods “are not the reverent disposition that the Church requires.”

When ashes are placed in a public location such as a cemetery, a plaque identifies the remains. This allows future generations to honor the person. Many people in their grief keep the ashes at home, but they make it difficult for others to remember and respect the deceased when they visit public cemeteries.

In today’s first reading we hear Job shout his faith from the midst of his suffering. He says, “Oh, would that my words were written down! Would that they were inscribed in a record: That with an iron chisel and with lead they were cut in the rock forever! But as for me, I know that my Vindicator lives” (19:23-25). When the cremated remains of a person are placed in a cemetery, the fact of this faithful person’s life is cut into the rock forever.

Catholic priests and deacons are available to help families who want to commit the ashes of their loved ones to a permanent place. We conduct a ceremony at the grave that will give dignity to the person’s life, acknowledge the grief of the mourners, and express our hope in the resurrection. When we take these actions on behalf of the faithful departed, we more fully express our prayer that they may rest in peace.

*Monday, November 2, 2015*