

CREMATION *again?*

Dear Father Kerper: A few months ago I heard on the news that the Church is now against cremation. Several of my friends and family members opted for cremation in recent years. Our bodies belong to us. Shouldn't people make their own decisions about the disposal of their bodies? Why does the Church even have rules about burial?

While current law does indeed promote the notion of “owning my body,” Christian tradition takes a very different view: God “owns” our bodies. As such, we must try to follow the example of our ancestors in faith – Jewish and Christian – by always treating human remains as sacred objects worthy of reverence, proper care, and some form of visible marking.

Let's examine the biblical basis for treating the human body as “God's property.” This obviously begins with God's creation of the human race. We are not self-made; instead we are created. Just as skilled workers own their handiwork, so too God “owns” human beings, the masterpiece of creation.

Long before the birth of Christ, the people of Israel grasped the sacredness of the human body, whether living or dead. We see this in sacred Scripture, which records the full body burials of Abraham, Moses, Joseph and other prominent leaders. Bodies were never burned, and Israel greatly honored people who provided reverent burials for strangers. See, for example, the books of Tobit and 2 Maccabees.

This divine “ownership” of the body received an even richer interpretation among the earliest Christians, notably from St. Paul. As a self-declared Pharisee, St. Paul had already believed in bodily resurrection before encountering the Risen Christ. His belief in the essential permanence of the human body, even beyond death, certainly reinforced his notion of divine “ownership.”



Three texts from St. Paul deserve attention. In 1 Corinthians, he wrote: “Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.” (12:27) Through baptism and the Eucharist we truly become embedded in the living body of Christ. Though we retain our individual bodies, we become united with Christ in an “organic” way. As members of His Body, we belong to Him, just as our arms and legs belong to us.

God's “ownership” of our bodies becomes even more graphic in chapter 3 of 1 Corinthians. St. Paul wrote: “Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you?” He then added a shocking warning: “If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy that person. For God's temple is holy and you are the temple.” (cf. 1 Cor. 3:16-17)

In Romans 12 St. Paul proposed another explicit image of “ownership.” He wrote: “Offer your bodies as living sacrifices to God.” (Romans 12:1)

Israel offered abundant sacrifices to God, such as sheep, goats, oxen and grain. Through the ritual destruction of these precious commodities, Israel humbly acknowledged that God “owned” them. Likewise, as St. Paul insisted, God “owns” our bodies – and those of all Christians – and so we must respect them, whether living or dead.

If we accept the Lord's “ownership” of our bodies, then we can understand – and appreciate – the Church's norms about Christian burial.

Last October, the Congregation for the

Doctrine of the Faith published new guidelines about Catholic funeral practices. Much of the secular media, which thrives on dramatic conflict, reported that the Church now prohibited cremation. Actually, the Church changed nothing. Rather it restated longstanding teaching and responded to some new trends, which the Church regards as dangerously irreverent.

Let's look at the main points. The Church has always preferred full body burial. Indeed, the funeral rites, which offer hope and comfort to the living, continue to presuppose the presence of the dead body during the vigil and celebration of the funeral Mass.

Over 60 years ago, the Church began to tolerate – not approve – cremation in exceptional circumstances, such as plagues, wars, and the inability to transport corpses.

During the past 20 years or so, many Catholics have chosen cremation – the tolerated exception – instead of full body burial – the preferred norm. The document issued last October simply reaffirmed the Church's strong preference for burial without prohibiting cremation.

As cremation has become more common, three practices have become widespread: scattering the ashes, dividing the ashes among multiple people and places, and retaining unburied human remains.

Of these three practices, scattering ashes departs most radically from Christian tradition. Whether explicitly intended or not, it seems to deny – or not even know – Christian belief in the bodily resurrection of the dead. Moreover, it imitates ancient religions that disperse human remains to affirm a key doctrine, namely that human beings are spirit only and will never again have bodily existence. People who have this belief neither expect nor desire bodily resurrection. How, then, could we copy their rituals without abandoning a core belief of our Christian faith?

Well-meaning people who retain a loved one's remains have many different motives, such as avoiding the cost of burial, plans for a future interment in a common grave, or the emotional inability to “let go” of one's spouse, child, or parent. While understandable, all such reasons somehow claim “ownership” of that which came from God and should therefore return to the consecrated ground of a Catholic cemetery or a blessed grave somewhere else.

The division of ashes into multiple graves,

KEY POINTS FROM "TO RISE WITH CHRIST"

"To Rise with Christ," the new document on Christian Burial issued on March 18, 2016 and published in English on October 25, 2016 at Rome

- **THE CHURCH STRONGLY PREFERS FULL-BODY BURIAL**

"The Church continues to prefer the practice of burying the bodies of the deceased, because this shows a greater esteem towards the deceased."

- **CREMATION MAY BE TOLERATED**

"Nevertheless, cremation is not prohibited, unless it was chosen for reasons contrary to Christian doctrine."

- **ASHES CAN NOT BE SCATTERED**

"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. These courses of action cannot be legitimized by an appeal to the sanitary, social, or economic motives that may have occasioned the choice of cremation."

- **ASHES CAN NOT BE KEPT AT HOME**

"The conservation of the ashes of the departed in a domestic residence is not permitted."

- **ASHES MUST BE BURIED**

"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."

- **NO FUNERAL FOR THOSE WHO CREMATE TO DENY CHRISTIAN FAITH**

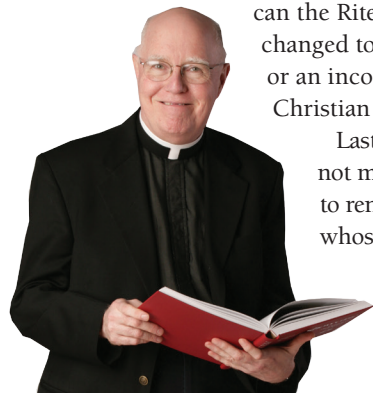
"When the deceased notoriously has requested cremation and the scattering of their ashes for reasons contrary to the Christian faith, a Christian funeral must be denied to that person."

jewelry, knickknacks, and other receptacles destroys the former bodily integrity of the deceased person. Though God can surely raise the dead whose remains have been scattered or divided, a single "final resting place" symbolizes the connection between the "seed" – the dead person's remains – and the "fruit" – the glorified body destined to be raised up on the Last Day.

Baptized Catholics are ordinarily entitled to the full rites of Christian Burial. However, these rituals are clearly ordered to burial, either of the body or the completely consolidated ashes of the deceased.

Just as the Eucharist cannot be chopped into pieces – some that we desire and others that we reject – neither can the Rite of Christian Burial be radically changed to accommodate personal preferences or an incomplete or distorted version of the Christian faith.

Last October's document from Rome was not meant to stir up trouble. Rather it seeks to renew a deep love for our beloved dead whose remains, the true "property of God," deserve the reverent and awe-filled respect accorded to most Christians for 2,000 years. ■



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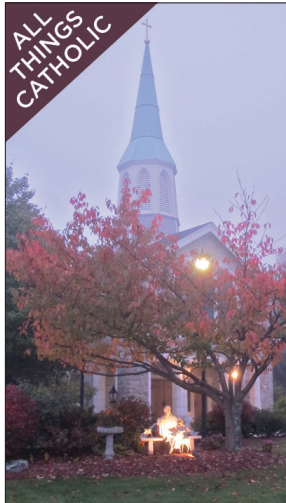
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