

3. The remains can be buried in a number of places:
 - There may be specific provision within a cemetery.
 - It can be possible to bury the ashes in the existing grave of a family member or relative.
 - Some parishes have provided a burial place either within a church or church grounds. Before such a provision is made there should be consultation with diocesan authorities. Once ashes are buried it is intended by both Church and State that those ashes will remain there. Indeed, by law, once they have been buried cremated remains may not be removed without permission from the Home Office, and in some circumstances from the Church also.
 - The remains can also be buried on private property but the conditions noted in the previous point would apply.

BISHOPS' CONFERENCE OF ENGLAND AND WALES
DEPARTMENT FOR CHRISTIAN LIFE AND WORSHIP

Guidance note on **The Burial of Ashes**

Introduction

Since in baptism the body was marked with the seal of the Trinity and became the temple of the Holy Spirit, Christians respect and honour the bodies of the dead and the places where they rest.

(Order of Christian Funerals 19)

In the funeral liturgy the body of the deceased is revered by the sprinkling with Holy Water and incensed. This is a reminder that the Church's concern for the dignity of human life is seamless: from conception to being laid to rest. How we treat those who are dying, the bodies of those who have died and the support we give to those who mourn is a sign of how we cherish life.

Since 1963 the Church has given permission for Catholics to be cremated. Prior to this Cremation was seen to be anti-Christian in intention. There was concern that there were anti-Catholic, anti-Christian, agendas being pursued by at least some who were promoting cremation as an option for the 'disposal' of bodies. This concern about the purpose of cremation finds expression in the 1983 *Code of Canon Law* which, while repeating the former permission, forbids cremation where it is 'chosen for reasons which are contrary to Christian teaching Can 1176 §3'. A strong recommendation is given for burial: the returning of a person's remains to the earth.

In England and Wales it is estimated that 70% of the general population is cremated and that the figure for Catholics is similar. Here cremation has developed as an option due to pressure on urban space and the lack of a



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tradition of re-using graves. The edition of the *Order of Christian Funerals* authorised for use in England and Wales therefore provides Catholic liturgical rites to be used at a Crematorium. These are forms of the Rite of Committal, which may lead some to assume that burial and cremation are equivalent actions. They are not. Cremation simply accelerates the decomposition of the body. It does not achieve the final ‘disposal’ of the remains.

The following is noted with regard to the Rite of Committal:

The rite of committal, the conclusion of the funeral rites, is the final act of the community of faith in caring for the body of its deceased member...

In committing the body to its resting place, the community expresses the hope that, with all those who have gone before marked with the sign of faith, the deceased awaits the glory of the resurrection. The rite of committal is an expression of the communion that exists between the Church on earth and the Church in heaven: the deceased passes with the farewell prayers of the community of believers into the welcoming company of those who need faith no longer but see God face to face. (OCF 219, 221)

That expression of continued communion is commonly experienced in the case of a burial – even if only because the grave remains a place where grieving can be focussed.

In the case of cremation there is no grave or resting place and there is the practical issue of what to do with the ashes. In light of the Church’s expectation with regard to burial even of cremated remains it is perhaps best regarded that the rite of committal at a crematorium the rite is not concluded until the ashes have been buried. Consequently, in the *Order of Christian Funerals* the Church provides a rite for the burial of ashes where the cremated remains are returned reverently to the earth.

Despite this, even in the case of Catholic funerals, a significant number of cremated remains are not collected by the relatives but are simply disposed of by the crematorium. Even when people have received the cremated remains of their dead they often do not know what to do with them so they are kept at home. In society at large, the common expectation is that ashes are to be scattered, for example at a place particularly favoured by

the deceased – e.g. a hillside or a football ground. This view seems equally commonly held among Catholics. It may be asked what beliefs are being expressed when people scatter ashes. There has also been the development of the range of secular rites and practices regarding the ‘disposal’ of ashes – e.g. firing them in a rocket to explode in the sky; turning them into an artificial diamond; storing them in a glass ornament; or dividing ashes between family members. These may well be a sign that services at a crematorium do not of themselves necessarily bring a sense of completion to the process of ‘laying the dead to rest’.

Guidance

1. Where the bereaved choose to have the deceased cremated they should be advised of the strong recommendation of the Church that cremated remains be buried at a later stage.
 - This advice may be from the priest, a member of a bereavement team or the funeral director.
 - The Liturgy Office has produced a simple leaflet: **Catholic Funerals, a guide**, which can be download and made available locally: www.liturgyoffice.org.uk/Resources/OCF/FuneralsGuide.pdf
 - The diocese of Westminster has produced a leaflet on **Catholics and Cremation** which can be downloaded: http://www.rcdow.org.uk/liturgy/default.asp?library_ref=18&content_ref=1939
2. A liturgical rite is provided in the *Order of Christian Funerals* for the burial of Ashes.
 - It can be adapted according to the circumstances. The introductory notes advise that if it is done within a short time of cremation, it will not be necessary to repeat the entire rite of committal.
 - By necessity the burial of the cremated remains will take place some time after the funeral. It may be, for example, an opportunity for family and friends to gather to mark a ‘month’s mind’.
 - The **Rite for the Burial of Ashes** can be downloaded from the Liturgy Office website: <http://www.liturgyoffice.org.uk/Resources/OCF>