



Theology Corner

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Theological Reflections by Paul Chutikorn - Director of Faith Formation

“Can Catholics be Cremated?”

The topic of cremation is often one that generates a bit of confusion due to the fact that it was a banned practice in the Church prior to 1963. But in order to answer the question of whether Catholics can be cremated, we must first ask why it was banned in the first place? It all stems from the Church’s doctrine professing belief in the Resurrection of the Body. As you will recall, every Sunday in our profession of the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed, we say: **“I look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come.”** The resurrection of the body is what is known as a *de fide* (of the faith) teaching of the Catholic Church, which means that it is an essential part of the faith that cannot be doubted without falling into heresy. Scripture makes numerous statements about the resurrection of the dead. For instance, Matthew 27:52 says: “the tombs also were opened, and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised.” John 5:28-29 also says, “for an hour is coming, in which all who are in the tombs will hear His voice and will come forth; those who did the good deeds to a resurrection of life, those who committed the evil deeds to a resurrection of judgment.” In addition to scripture, the traditional philosophical understanding of the human person is that the body and soul are a unity. Since both are intrinsically united to make up a human being as one substance, a human’s identity is incomplete without the body. For this reason, it is such that the body – not in the corruptible state that we experience now, but in a “glorified” or “spiritual” state, is reunited with the soul in heaven.

But what does all of this have to do with being cremated? Well, it has a lot to do with it because we have a duty to respect our bodies which are inherently good. While our glorified bodies are not limited to the state in which our material bodies were left in, as we see in the corporal works of mercy, it is essential that bodies are treated with respect and laid to rest in a consecrated place with a hope in the resurrection of the body. The reason for the lift on the cremation ban is that cremation in and of itself is not a sin, although it was always discouraged or completely forbidden as a matter of tradition since the early Church (much of which was due to the common pagan practice of cremation). The key here is to ensure that we understand that the human body is not something to simply dispose of, but to keep together in preparation for the resurrection. For this reason, the catechism says: “The Church permits cremation, provided that it does not demonstrate a denial of faith in the resurrection of the body.” (CCC 2301). This denial is a major reason why it was banned in the first place. The Church only eased up on this requirement provided that one truly accepts the doctrine of the resurrection of the body, given that God is not limited to raising to life a body which has been buried. Yet, it must be noted that the unity of the body itself must be preserved insofar as it should remain intact and not be scattered anywhere. It also cannot ordinarily be stored in your home, since this is not an adequate place of burial, just as you would not keep a casket in your home. Thus, it should be either buried or entombed in a timely manner following the funeral. I will leave you with this beautiful quote from the Catechism:

“In death, the separation of the soul from the body, the human body decays and the soul goes to meet God, while awaiting its reunion with its glorified body. God, in his almighty power, will definitively grant incorruptible life to our bodies by reuniting them with our souls, through the power of Jesus’ Resurrection.” (CCC 997)