Down to Earth #1

Q&A about Catholic Cemeteries

**May Catholics have their cremated remains made into jewelry?**

The short answer: This is not an option open to faithful Catholics.

The “death care” industry does not care about Catholic teaching as such, but generally will accommodate whatever the customer wants. So some people asked for jewelry made with cremated remains, and the industry responded. The process involves encasing a small amount of the bone fragments (they are not really “ashes”) in glass or metal as a pendant or ring, like the one recently lost in the garbage by teenager Emily Dickerson; or placing the remains in a locket like the one lost by running back Aaron Jones during an NFL game a few years ago. The Church teaches that sentimentality – “I want to keep them close to me always” – does not justify treating cremated remains this way. Further, the manufacturing of jewelry out of cremated remains requires the division of the remains, which is also specifically forbidden by the Church. For a Catholic, the only permitted destination for cremated remains is the cemetery.

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Down to Earth #2

Q&A about Catholic Cemeteries

**Most human remains must be buried in a cemetery, but what about relics of the saints?**

Because humans are created in God’s image, we must treat human remains respectfully. Especially for those whose bodies were sanctified in baptism, which prefigures resurrection, burial is usually the most respectful way of treating remains.

The Church canonizes some people whose exemplary lives show the power of God’s grace. We call these people saints. Saints’ remains also call for respect. Because their bodies were the instruments that displayed God’s grace at work, and the Church has publicly acknowledged this, it is respectful and proper to venerate their remains. Venerating first-class relics – fragments of bone, hair, or even limbs – help our faith by assuring us that God’s grace is effective.

For both types of deceased – the regular and the canonized – respect for remains is the rule. Veneration of relics is higher respect than simple burial, and is only proper for those saints who are acknowledged publicly by the Church through the process of canonization.

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Down to Earth #3

Q&A about Catholic Cemeteries

**What can a faithful Catholic put on his or her headstone?**

Headstones and other more or less permanent memorials at cemeteries are private property of the purchaser, but may only be placed in a cemetery with permission. Each cemetery has its own requirements, and monument companies are usually good at knowing the requirements of each cemetery.

Because designs are so varied, there are no simple answers. But headstone designs should enhance the Catholic and religious nature of the Catholic cemetery.

Catholic cemeteries, which are consecrated, require that headstone designs display nothing offensive to the faith. So no swastikas, masonic symbols, or pride flags are allowed. Most Catholic cemeteries require that a Christian symbol be predominant, if any symbol is to be used. What about other types of symbols? Farm scenes and military or police insignia recall things with enduring value, and are not objectionable. Sports team logos, images of pets, and witticisms (“I told you I was sick!”) tend to trivialize the environment, and are discouraged.

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Down to Earth #4

Q&A about Catholic Cemeteries

**May I bury two people’s remains in one grave?**

In short: Often the answer is “yes”, but each cemetery has its own rules on this.

Each burial requires an easement, a burial right. When you “purchase a grave” you are not buying real estate, you are buying permission to bury one person in a certain spot. To bury another person in that same spot requires a “second right of burial.” Some Catholic cemeteries offer second rights at a lower cost than the first right. In some Catholic cemeteries in our diocese, the policy is that a grave may have a full body burial first, and up to two cremation burials after. Other cemeteries allow two full-body burials in one grave as long as the arrangement is made ahead of time.

If you are making your cemetery arrangements and think you might want to purchase a second right of burial, you should discuss that with your Catholic cemetery representative.

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Down to Earth #5

Q&A about Catholic Cemeteries

**Why do things cost so much at the cemetery?**

The main reason burial is so expensive is that the cemetery is committing to maintaining your grave until Jesus returns. If that happens tomorrow, the expense won’t matter that much. If it happens in 10,000 years, you’ll have gotten the best deal ever on lawn mowing.

That said, some Catholic cemeteries offer different options at different price points. And some cemeteries are able to offer need-based assistance. Sometimes those who have purchased graves decide to be buried elsewhere, and return them to the cemetery for use by the indigent. This is a beautiful way of participating in the corporal work of mercy of burying the dead.

Bigger picture, if American cemeteries adopted the European model of term graves, where you don’t have a permanent resting place but get maybe 50 years before the cemetery re-sells your grave, costs could be significantly reduced. And some solution like that will be needed eventually. Otherwise, in 200,000 years, the earth will be totally covered with graves with no room for farmland.

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Down to Earth #6

Q&A about Catholic Cemeteries

**When is the best time to make my cemetery arrangements?**

The Church does not answer this question, so this is my opinion: All Catholics need cemetery property. It is charitable to make those arrangements yourself, rather than leaving this task to your survivors. It is best to make these arrangements before you are so sick or so old that considering the decision becomes difficult.

There are tragic exceptions, but usually you don’t need to make cemetery arrangements when you are younger than forty. Certain milestones can serve a prompt to make cemetery arrangements: retirement, estate planning, youngest child graduating from college, paying off your mortgage, moving into assisted living, diagnosis of serious medical problem, or death of a spouse. Not all of these will apply to everybody, but are the kinds of life events that can cause us to reflect on where we are in life, and where we are going.

Ideally, making cemetery arrangements can be part of the traditional Christian practice of *memento mori*: remember you must die, and live knowing you will give an account of your life to your Creator.

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Down to Earth #7

Q&A about Catholic Cemeteries

**What is “green” or “natural” burial, and what does the Church teach about it?**

Broadly speaking, green burial refers to taking steps to minimize any negative environmental impact of our final disposition. Frequently, it means foregoing embalming, being buried in a shroud rather than a casket, and foregoing a vault (the concrete container that prevents grave settling). Other, less common practices include hand-digging of the grave rather than using a backhoe, and using a biodegradable marker rather than granite. Many, perhaps most, people throughout the history of the world have had a green or natural burial.

Catholics who look to Jesus’ burial as a model will see that His burial could be described as “green”. As children of Adam, we are called to care for creation, so environmental concerns are good to consider. And all the options mentioned above are open to the faithful Catholic, provided the cemetery allows the specific practice.

Some practices that claim to be “green” are not open to the faithful Catholic: composting and alkaline hydrolysis are two examples of these.

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Down to Earth #8

Q&A about Catholic Cemeteries

**What do I, a faithful Catholic, do if my dad asks me to scatter his ashes?**

Keep in mind that cremated remains are bone fragments, not really “ashes”, so they will remain where they are scattered for a long time. If scattered on private property without permission, that is called littering, which is illegal.

It can be painful and awkward to refuse someone’s request about their remains, especially if that someone is a close family member. But the Church has specifically taught that scattering cremated remains is not something faithful Catholics do (you can look up the 2016 instruction, *Ad resurgendum cum Christo*).

So you can tell your father that you wish to be a faithful Catholic, and that you won’t be able to honor that request, just as you wouldn’t knowingly commit yourself to any other act that contradicts clear Church teaching. If the request is contained in a document accessed after his death, you can prayerfully ask the Lord to relay a message for you. Faithful Catholics bring cremated remains to the cemetery.

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Down to Earth #9

Q&A about Catholic Cemeteries

**Is embalming required?**

Neither the Catholic Church nor the State of Wisconsin require embalming.

If you plan for an open-casket vigil, embalming is usually a practical requirement imposed by nature.

Cemeteries typically require embalming if you will be entombed above ground in a mausoleum.

Embalming became a common practice in the United States during the Civil War, when Northern families would hire embalming surgeons to go to the battlefield and prepare the bodies of their fallen sons for transport home by train. Often, eminent personages are embalmed to allow for an extended viewing period. Abraham Lincoln and recent popes are examples of these.

Some well-known Catholics have gone to great lengths to avoid being embalmed. St. Anthony the Great had to plan carefully to ensure that he was not embalmed, as was common practice in Egypt in the fourth century. His disciples buried him privately in an unmarked grave to ensure that there would be no after-burial change of plans.

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Down to Earth #10

Q&A about Catholic Cemeteries

**Why are eulogies not allowed during the funeral Mass?**

Eulogies have their place: at the wake before or after the Vigil, graveside before or after Committal, at the funeral luncheon, or printed in the funeral program or parish bulletin. And eulogies have their purpose: to honor the deceased, share our stories, and express our grief.

The funeral Mass, along with the Vigil and the Committal, are liturgical prayers of the Church which celebrate the mercy won for us by Christ’s sacrifice on the Cross, and which seek to apply that mercy especially to the deceased. Anything that distracts from that intense, prayerful focus on Christ’s mercy is excluded, and can be considered an injustice toward the deceased for whom we are praying. The Church has taught in several places – the *General Instruction of the Roman Missal* (382) and the *Order of Christian Funerals* (141) – that eulogies are specifically excluded from funeral Masses. This is not to say that eulogies are bad, but rather that their place is not *within* the liturgy.

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Down to Earth #11

Q&A about Catholic Cemeteries

**What is the difference between a funeral and a celebration of life?**

A Catholic funeral – the Vigil, Mass, and Committal – focuses on Christ’s mercy and the salvation won for us on the Cross, especially seeking the application of His mercy to the deceased.

A celebration of life typically focuses on the deceased’s life in this world, our memories of the person, and the person’s relationships.

Funerals look forward, celebrations of life look back. And as we grieve, it is reasonable to do both. That is why the wake often includes both a Vigil liturgy and informal social time. That is why there is typically a luncheon after a funeral Mass and Committal.

Sometimes it is said “funerals are sad, and I don’t want people to be sad, so let’s have a celebration of life instead.” But the death of our loved ones *is* sad, and we need time to grieve. There is also hope for the next life, and that is what the funeral liturgy is about. A celebration of life without a funeral expresses the same despair that is at the root of “eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we die.” That is not a Christian approach to death.

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Down to Earth #12

Q&A about Catholic Cemeteries

**When cremation is chosen, what happens to the metal from artificial knees?**

Pacemakers must be removed prior to cremation because batteries present a risk of explosion. But artificial joints are left in place until after the cremation process is complete. The bones remaining are then raked out of the retort (cremation oven) into a tray, and once cool, any remaining metal is removed manually for recycling. Often a magnet is used to assist this removal process. It is important that all metal be removed prior to pulverizing the bones because any remaining metal would damage the equipment used. By Wisconsin state law, the bones must be reduced to a particle size of one-eighth inch or less. A machine similar to a blender is used for this purpose.

Since 1963, cremation has been allowed by the Catholic Church, as long as it is not chosen for reasons contrary to the Catholic faith, like denial of the resurrection of the body. However, the traditional Christian choice is burial, following the example of Jesus.

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