

# MASS FIRST, CREMATION SECOND



The impact of cremation on  
the Catholic Funeral rite

By  
Joseph J. Earthman

---

*H*ave you noticed that when a member of your parish passes away, you more frequently find yourself attending a “memorial service” instead of a Funeral Mass? While a Funeral Mass and memorial service have a few similarities, there are important differences. For example, a Funeral Mass has several unique and unmistakable characteristics: the journey of the funeral hearse to and from the church; the guardianship of the honored pallbearers; and, the solemn, slow procession of the pall-draped casket into and out of the sanctuary, to name a few.

The most critical difference, however, is that at a memorial service, the life being honored, the very person for whom the service is being celebrated, the person who died, is not there.

Confronting death is not easy, whether it is someone close to you, or a distant acquaintance, and each of us deals with the emotional impact of death in our own way. Understanding how we, as individuals, as families, and as a community, celebrate, honor, respect and mourn the loss of our loved ones, can help us to better navigate the confusion and unpredictability of loss and begin the healing process, especially in the days immediately following a death.

As memorial services become more frequent amongst Catholics, it is important to consider why a shift away from funerals and toward memorial services is taking place. Why are we now choosing to exclude the presence of the very person who died from their own end-of-life celebration? To answer these questions, we must also consider the practice that has become almost synonymous with memorial services: cremation.

In 1995, fewer than one-fourth of all deaths in the United States resulted in cremation. In just fifteen years, by 2015, that amount had jumped to a little over 50%. That’s a pretty steep increase in a relatively short amount of time. We also know that, in general, families that choose cremation are more likely to choose a memorial service, or sadly, no service at all, than they are to have a Funeral Mass with the body of the deceased present. It is the close correlation between memorial services and cremation that suggests the critical question: *is cremation “killing” the Catholic Funeral?*

To be fair, cremation is not actually doing the “killing.” What is killing the Catholic Funeral is the pervasive misunderstanding of the role cremation *should* play in the overall funeral process. The decision to cremate is actually independent of the choice to hold a funeral or a memorial service. Cremation and burial relate only to the final disposition of the body of the deceased (how the person’s physical remains will rest in perpetuity). Just as someone can be buried in a cemetery after a funeral is held, someone can be cremated after a funeral is held. Cremation is not an alternative to a Funeral Mass – it is an alternative to burial. Unfortunately, the misunderstanding of this often results in the unnecessary exclusion of the deceased from their own funeral.

To illustrate the importance of the presence of the body of the deceased at their own Funeral Mass, let us consider to role of the church, the actual brick and mortar, in our daily lives. We communicate, interact, and experience the Holy Spirit, not just through prayer, but through our physical senses, and the physical church plays an inseparable role in that experience.

The cool touch of holy water on our foreheads as we enter the church, the taste of the Body and Blood of Christ at communion,



the stained-glass windows and statuary that beautify our churches and delight our eyes, the majesty of the pipe organ, and the smell of the incense are all examples of physical elements combined to make the Catholic Mass a tactile and sensual experience. It lives in our skin, on our taste buds, and in our eyes and ears every bit as much as it lives in our souls. We are called to honor the dead both spiritually *and* physically. When we exclude the deceased from the Funeral Mass, we are failing that obligation. Mass first, cremation second.

Nationwide, one of the primary factors that has led to the increase in cremations is cost. Funerals are perceived to be expensive. In fairness, funeral homes and funeral directors bear much of the responsibility for this because many fail to adequately distinguish the “funeral”

from the disposition (burial or cremation), even though they are, in fact, separate services with their own separate costs. Historically, funerals and burials have been sold as one combined service. However, much of the perceived expense of a funeral is actually solely related to the burial. In general, burial alone can easily double the overall cost of the services. Coupled with a lack of emotional preparedness for the inevitability of death, many families simply cannot afford the cost of a funeral *and* burial, so they eschew BOTH and chose to cremate. They are simply not aware that an alternative does exist. Mass first, cremation second.

For example, while much depends on your choice of funeral service provider, you do not need to buy a casket in order to have a Funeral Mass if the deceased is going to be cremated later.

Some funeral homes will provide a ceremonial casket (sometimes called a “rental” casket), typically for a nominal fee or (such as in the case of my business), for no fee at all. Also, contrary to popular belief, the deceased does not need to be embalmed nor viewed in order to be at church,



in a casket, at their own funeral, when the funeral is followed by cremation. There is no state law requiring embalming for this purpose. Whether or not the deceased will be viewed is entirely up to each individual family, and embalming is rarely necessary and should never be required. Eliminating just those two costs: the casket, and embalming, makes a Funeral Mass followed by cremation much more affordable.

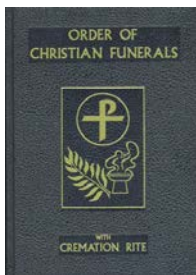
There is also a misconception that cremating someone as quickly as possible after death will efficiently diminish or hasten the pain of loss. This is not only false, but a rush to “get over” a loss can actually prolong and complicate the grieving process. Although cremating first, followed by a memorial service, may seem easier, simpler, and “less sad” on the surface, avoiding the physical reality of death may only defer the mourning process, which may delay healing and perpetuate a misunderstanding of loss and how to manage it.

In my career as a funeral director, I've had the privilege of assisting many families with their preparations for both funeral and memorial services, and I have seen that there is no easy or "best" way to say goodbye. Dealing with loss is heart-wrenching, but the act of saying goodbye is an important first step to healing. Frequently at funerals, I see people reaching out to touch the casket as it slowly passes down the aisle, the final step in a life's pilgrimage. It's a natural, almost instinctive gesture: to place a hand of blessing, or love, or farewell, on the casket; to create one final, physical bridge between you and the person who has died. When the casket is not included in the service, that moment of connection is also lost.

To quote from the Order of Christian Funerals, from which the Catholic funeral liturgy is read, "Since in baptism the body was marked with the seal of the Trinity and became the temple of the Holy Spirit, Christians respect and honor the bodies of the dead and the places where they rest."

And in fact, to understand the simplest reason for the body of the deceased to be present at the Funeral Mass, we need not look any further than our own

baptisms. As infants, we enter the church, carried by our loving parents. We are anointed with the sign of the Cross, bathed in Holy Water, and held high, literally, so that those in attendance may share in the joy of witnessing and being part of a new, innocent life entering our Catholic church, both physically and spiritually. Now consider a baptism without the presence of the infant child.



The body of the deceased should be present at the Funeral Mass, whenever possible. Since 1963, cremation has been accepted by the Catholic Church as an alternative to burial, but the body of the deceased, the temple of God that held the Holy Spirit, that touched lives and left precious memories, should be with us at the Funeral Mass.

Mass first, cremation second.

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "J. Eastman".



Joseph Earthman, owner and managing funeral director of Joseph J. Earthman Generations, is a fourth-generation funeral service provider, an advocate for funeral service

reform, and an educator on practical funeral options.

*For complimentary copies of this brochure, please call our office at any time: (713) 802-0000.*

*Family Owned & Operated*

**JOSEPH J. EARTHMAN**  
GENERATIONS

Funeral Services for Burial & Cremation

234 Westcott St.  
Houston, Texas 77007

(713) 802-0000  
[joseph@josephjearthman.com](mailto:joseph@josephjearthman.com)