

November 2, 2000

The Commemoration of All the Faithful Departed



To Christ's Faithful of the Diocese of La Crosse:

**On the Christian Burial of the Dead**

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

The care with which we bury the dead expresses our faith in the victory over everlasting death which Our Lord Jesus Christ has won in our human nature by His own Death and Resurrection. We bury the dead in the sure hope of the resurrection of the body, when their mortal bodies will share fully in the glory of the Risen Christ.

Saint Paul encountered a certain lack of faith in the resurrection of the body among the early Christians at Corinth. He responded by pointing out that to deny the resurrection of the body is to deny the Resurrection of Christ, and to deny the Resurrection of Christ is to empty the Christian faith of its content.

(Cf. *1 Cor 15,12-14*) Saint Paul went on to teach about the transformation of our bodies which will take place at the Second Coming of Our Lord Jesus Christ:

The trumpet will sound and the dead will be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed. This corruptible body must be clothed with incorruptibility, this mortal body with immortality. (*1 Cor 15, 52b-53 NAB*)

Saint Paul likened the glorification of our earthly body at the Lord's Coming to the transformation of the seed which is buried in the ground, decays and then comes forth from the earth as a living plant. Saint Paul, using this image from agriculture, taught the truth about the resurrection of the body to the early Christians at Corinth:

What is sown in the earth is subject to decay, what rises is incorruptible. What is sown is ignoble, what rises is glorious. Weakness is sown, strength rises up. A natural body is put down and a spiritual body comes up. (*1 Cor 15, 42b-44 NAB*)

The Christian gives up his spirit in death with hope in the resurrection of the body when body and soul will be united once again in the glory which is without end. We bring the body of the deceased Christian to reverent burial in anticipation of the resurrection of the body in glory on the Last Day.

Because of the important place which the Christian burial of the dead has in the life of faith and because of many questions which are raised today about Christian burial, I offer you the following reflections and directives, so that the manner of burying our deceased brothers and sisters in the Church may express with integrity the truth of our Catholic faith.

## ◆THE CHRISTIAN GRAVE OR TOMB

Since the beginning of the Church, special liturgical rites have accompanied the burial of the dead. They express the faith both of the deceased member of the faithful and of the Christian community entrusted with the responsibility of burying reverently her members who have died. Central to the liturgical rites is the place of the final disposition of the body: the grave or tomb. The prayer which we offer as we commit the body to the grave or tomb at the conclusion of the rites of Christian burial expresses our faith in the Resurrection of Our Lord and in the resurrection of the body, by which we share fully in His Resurrection:

Lord Jesus Christ,  
by your own three days in the tomb,  
you hallowed the graves of all who believe in you and so made the  
grave a sign of hope  
that promises resurrection  
even as it claims our mortal bodies.

*(Order of Christian Funerals, 1998 ed., No. 218; hereafter, OCF)*

Although the place of burial evokes sadness at parting with the earthly company of a brother or sister in the Christian community, it is also a symbol of hope in God and in His promise to raise our bodies in glory like the Risen Body of His Son seated at His right hand.

The place of burial is sacred, for it receives the human body which has been a temple of the Holy Spirit, the instrument by which the Christian soul expressed itself in the world. (Cf. *OCF*, Nos. 19 and 411-412) What is more, the body received by the grave or tomb in burial is destined for resurrection on the Last Day. After the celebration of the Funeral Mass or Funeral Liturgy with the body of the deceased present, the body is interred or entombed in expectation of its resurrection on the Last Day. Burial of the body of the deceased is done in imitation of the burial of Our Lord Jesus Christ in the sure hope of sharing in His Resurrection.

Because of the central place which care for the burial of the dead has in the life of faith, burying the dead is one of the corporal works of mercy. (Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, No. 2447) The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* teaches us about respect for the body of the dead:

The bodies of the dead must be treated with respect and charity, in faith and hope of the Resurrection. The burial of the dead is a corporal work of mercy; it honors the children of God, who are temples of the Holy Spirit. (No. 2300)

The love which we are called to show to one another in life continues in death through our reverent burial of the dead and our prayers for their eternal rest.

The carrying out of the rites of Christian burial is one of the principal works of the parish priest who with "generous love" is "to help the sick, particularly those close to death, by refreshing them solicitously with

the sacraments and commending their souls to God." (Cann. 529, § 1; d. 530, no. 5)

The body of the deceased Christian is either buried in the ground (interment) or entombed in a mausoleum (entombment). Both interment and entombment symbolize the placing of the body in a sacred place while it awaits the resurrection on the Last Day.

Keeping this in mind, one understands why the rite of committal of the body is an integral part of the rites of Christian burial. Today, there is a certain tendency to detach the rite of committal from the other rites or even to eliminate it completely. Unless it is impossible to bury or entomb the body after the Funeral Mass or Funeral Liturgy, the committal should take place immediately. In the same line, the priest who celebrates the Funeral Mass or Funeral Liturgy should also conduct the rite of committal. If the priest is unable to conduct the committal, especially when it does not follow immediately the celebration of the Funeral Mass or Funeral Liturgy, it may be conducted by a deacon or Leader of Prayer. (Diocese of La Crosse, *Revised Norms for Leaders of Prayer in the Diocese of La Crosse*, 1 October 1997, No. 21; hereafter, *RNLP*)

#### ◆THE CATHOLIC CEMETERY

The word, which early Christians gave to the place for the burial or entombment of the dead, cemetery, comes from the Greek word for dormitory. It expresses the belief of the Christian, that the bodies of the dead rest in their place of burial or entombment until the resurrection of the body on the Last Day. Like the Christian grave or tomb, the Catholic cemetery is sacred and is to be maintained accordingly. In the Catholic cemetery, the ground is blessed for the purpose of burials. The Church has a special rite for the blessing of a cemetery, which is to be properly documented. (Cf. Can. 1208)

Church law requires that, when possible, the Church have its own cemeteries or, at least, a part of the civil cemetery designated for Catholic burials. (Cf. Can. 1240, § 1) If it is not possible to inter or entomb the dead in a Catholic cemetery or a Catholic section of a public cemetery, in which the ground or tomb is already blessed, then the individual grave or tomb is to be blessed during the rite of committal. (Cf. Can. 1240, § 2) The *Order of Christian Funerals* provides distinct prayers for the committal of the mortal remains in each situation. (Cf. *OCF*, No. 218)

The Church cares for her cemeteries *in perpetuum*, even if the parish which established the cemetery no longer exists. In the case of the suppression of a parish with its proper cemetery, the care of the cemetery is assigned to the pastor and faithful of a neighboring parish. The perpetual care funds of the cemetery remain inviolate and are administered so that they may provide for the ongoing maintenance of the cemetery. The cemetery retains its own committee or association which is governed by proper statutes.

The Catholic cemetery is arranged and adorned in a way which expresses the truth about death and the resurrection of the body. The direct care of the cemetery by the Church permits a strong witness to the Christian belief regarding death and provides the opportunity for the Church to carry out, to the fullest extent possible, her responsibilities toward the dead. The Catholic cemetery offers a permanent invitation to reflect

upon death as the gateway to eternal life.

The Diocese of La Crosse is required to have its own norms regarding Catholic cemeteries, "especially with regard to protecting and fostering their sacred character." (Can. 1243) The Acts of the Fourth Diocesan Synod have provided such norms, as will the Acts of the Fifth Diocesan Synod which was celebrated from June 11 to 14 of this year. (Cf. *The Bishop with His People: Fourth Synod of the Diocese of La Crosse, Celebrated April 28-May 1, 1986*, pp. 208-212) Diocesan law is to be followed in the establishment and care of every Catholic cemetery in the Diocese.

Parishes and their Catholic cemetery committees or associations are to exercise vigilant care over the Catholic cemetery in order that it may be maintained as an effective sign of Christian faith. The Catholic cemetery committee or association should meet at least once a year. Among its principal concerns is the perpetual care fund which provides for the fitting maintenance of the cemetery *in perpetuum*. Perpetual care funds constitute an inviolable trust which may not be invaded for any other purpose, no matter how worthy. (Cf. Can. 1302, §§ 1-2)

Questions regarding Catholic cemeteries, their administration and their care are to be referred to the Diocesan Director of Catholic Cemeteries. I also recommend two excellent publications of the National Catholic Cemetery Conference: *Guidelines for Christian Burial in the Catholic Church* (1992), and *The Catholic Cemetery: A Vision for the Millennium* (1997). They may be obtained from:

National Catholic Cemetery Conference  
710 North River Road  
Des Plaines, Illinois 60016  
☎847.824.8131

The Catholic cemetery should be a familiar place, in which we visit the graves or tombs of the deceased to pray for their eternal rest and find in their burial places a sign of faith and hope.

## ◆PRAYER FOR THE DEAD

At the time of death, the priest should be called to pray for the dying person and to celebrate the Sacraments, especially the Holy Eucharist in the form of Viaticum. The *Roman Ritual* contains a special section, *Pastoral Care of the Dying* (Part II of *Pastoral Care of the Sick: Rites of Anointing and Viaticum*), to direct the priest and the other faithful in assisting spiritually the dying person. The *Roman Ritual* indicates the distinct purpose of this special section:

The ministry to the dying places emphasis on trust in the Lord's promise of eternal life rather than on the struggle against illness which is characteristic of the pastoral care of the sick. (*Pastoral Care of the Sick: Rites of Anointing and Viaticum*, 1983 ed., No. 161)

Care should be taken to call upon the ministry of the priest in a timely manner, not waiting until the moment of death. The greatest help to the dying person is the prayer of the Church and, most of all, the reception of the Holy Eucharist as *Viaticum*, the spiritual food for the journey from this life to the life which is to come.

If the person has already died, the priest should also be called to offer the Church's prayers for the dead and to bless the body. (Cf. *Pastoral Care of the Sick: Rites of Anointing and Viaticum*, Nos. 223-231)

When the priest or deacon is not available or is unable to bring *Viaticum*, an extraordinary minister of the Holy Eucharist or Leader of Prayer should be called to bring the Sacrament to the dying. (Cf. *RNLP*, No.9) When the priest or deacon is not available or is unable to come to offer the prayers for the dying or for one already deceased, a Leader of Prayer should be called to assist the dying person and the family. (Cf. *RNLP*, No. 16)

Praying for the dead is an integral part of our Christian life; it is one of the spiritual works of mercy. Our prayer for the dead both honors their memory and expresses our faithful love as we assist them to be purified of any temporal punishment due to sin and to reach their final destiny and lasting home with God. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* instructs us about the importance of prayer for the dead:

From the beginning the Church has honored the memory of the dead and offered prayers in suffrage for them, above all the Eucharistic sacrifice, so that, thus purified, they may attain the beatific vision of God. The Church also commends almsgiving, indulgences, and works of penance undertaken on behalf of the dead. (No. 1032)

Prayer should be encouraged for all the dead. Even though a person may have lived a most exemplary life from all appearances, no one knows the soul of the departed and the temptations which he or she may have suffered in life. Often enough, as we know from the lives of the saints, those who practice the greatest virtue also suffer the greatest temptations. It is a grave injustice to the dead to say that they do not need our prayers. Rather, we should continue to express our love for the faithful departed by our prayers for their eternal rest. (Cf. *OCF*, Nos. 6-7)

The age-old custom of making an offering so that Mass may be celebrated for the eternal rest of the deceased is to be commended. The faithful who participate in the wake should be encouraged to make Mass offerings for the intention of the eternal rest of the deceased brother or sister. Offerings which are given for Masses for the deceased may not be used for any other purpose. Mass offerings should be given directly to the parish priest either by the family or by the funeral director. Mass offerings given at the time of death and burial should be turned over to the parish priest as soon as possible so that arrangements may be made for the celebration of the Masses requested.

In our time, for whatever reason, fewer Mass offerings are received at the time of death. The failure to have Masses offered for the dead is a failure of love for the deceased person. There is no more effective means to express our love and provide spiritual help for those who have died than to have the Mass offered for the eternal repose of their souls.

Relatives and friends should understand that it may not be possible for the parish priest to offer all of

the Masses in the home parish but that Mass offerings above and beyond what can be fulfilled in the local parish will be sent to priests in need of Mass intentions, both in the Diocese and especially in the Missions. With fewer priests in the service of the Diocese, fewer Masses are offered and there are fewer occasions to have a Mass offered for a deceased brother or sister in one's own parish. The senior priests of the Diocese, priests offering Mass in our Catholic schools and other Catholic institutions, and priests serving in the Missions are, however, able to offer the Masses requested. In fact, these priests, especially those in the Missions, depend upon Mass offerings for a part or the whole of their sustenance. There is ample possibility to have Masses offered for the dead, although they may not be offered in our own home parish.

In every parish of the Diocese of La Crosse, the spiritual work of participating in the Funeral Mass of a deceased parishioner is to be regularly taught and encouraged. Those who have time free should take special joy in honoring and assisting the dead by participating in the Funeral Mass.

November 2, the Commemoration of All the Faithful Departed (All Souls Day), should be a special time to participate in the Mass for the Dead, praying for the eternal rest of one's deceased relatives, friends and fellow parishioners. Participation in the Mass on the anniversary of death is also to be encouraged.

Prayers for the dead should be part of our daily prayer. The custom of praying for the dead at the end of each family meal is a most effective way of fulfilling our duty to pray for the dead. As mentioned above, visits to the graves or tombs of the dead to pray for their eternal rest should be a regular part of our Christian life.

#### ◆PLANNING THE FUNERAL RITES

The family or those in charge of the funeral arrangements should contact the parish priest at the same time as the funeral director is contacted. The planning of the funeral rites should be directed by the parish priest in accord with the *Order of Christian Funerals*. The Church's rites, which express the perennial faith of the Church, are to be respected in their integrity.

The time of death is usually heavy with emotion and can also be confusing for those who have been close to the deceased. It is important that those making the funeral arrangements have immediately the assistance of the priest and other parish ministers in planning well the funeral rites, in accord with the Church's teaching and practice.

Sometimes there is a question about the church from which the deceased is to be buried. Usually, the parish church of the deceased is chosen. (Cf. Can.n77, § 1) A member of the faithful has the right, however, to be buried from any church, a right which should always be respected. (Cf. Can.n77, § 2) Often, when a person is elderly and has lived away from his or her home parish for a number of years, the choice is made to return to the home parish for the rites of Christian burial, even though the deceased person may no longer be known in the parish. The parish priest and all the faithful of the parish should

always welcome the opportunity to provide the funeral rites, whether the deceased is personally known to the parish priest and parishioners or not.

The practice of celebrating the funeral rites in the care center in which the deceased person may have been living is to be discouraged. The deceased person should be brought to a parish church, even as it was in a parish church that he or she celebrated the mysteries of the faith, was united with Christ in the mystery of His Suffering, Death and Resurrection, and received His Body and Blood in Holy Communion. The parish has the solemn duty to bury the dead and to pray for the dead, and rejoices to carry out these corporal and spiritual works of mercy. The parish church is the usual place for the celebration of the Sacraments and other sacred rites. Rightly, at death, the body of the deceased is brought to the church for a final time, especially for the celebration of the Holy Eucharist for the repose of his or her soul.

### ◆THE VIGIL OR WAKE

The vigil for the deceased or the wake, as it is popularly called, is the important first part of the Church's funeral rites. It provides the opportunity for the expression of grief on the part of those to whom the deceased had been close either by reason of family, friendship or work. "At the vigil the Christian community keeps watch with the family in prayer to the God of mercy and finds strength in Christ's presence." (*OCF*, No. 56) It is most fitting for the priest, deacon or Leader of Prayer to be present for the first gathering in the presence of the body of the deceased. (Cf. *OCF*, Nos. 112-118; *RNLP*, No. 17)

It must be kept in mind that the wake is fully part of the funeral rites. Therefore, it should be planned and carried out with great respect for our faith, especially faith in the resurrection of the body. Whenever possible, music should be provided for the vigil liturgy. (Cf. *OCF*, Nos. 30-33)

Today, some believe that eliminating the wake lessens the grief of family and friends. In fact, foregoing the wake prevents the natural grief from having its appropriate expression among those who respected and loved the deceased. It also takes away the opportunity for the Christian community to offer the encouragement of faith to the grieving. (Cf. *1 Thes* 4,18; and *OCF*, Nos. 9 and 11) The lack of a proper wake risks distancing us from death as a part of life, the passage from this life to the life which is to come.

The celebration of the Office of the Dead from the *Liturgy of the Hours* during the time of wake or vigil is encouraged, especially when the wake takes place in the parish church. The public recitation of the Rosary of our Blessed Mother is also a most efficacious prayer for the eternal rest of the deceased. The vigil or wake may be conducted by a priest, deacon or Leader of Prayer. (Cf. *OCF*, Nos. 54-81; *RNLP*, No. 18)

It is fitting to hold the wake in the parish church which is truly a home for the deceased. When the wake is to take place in the church, the rite of reception at the church is to be observed. (Cf. *OCF*, Nos. 82-97) Some churches have a special room in the narthex or gathering area which is used for wakes. If the wake must

take place in the main body of the church, care must be taken to respect the presence of the Blessed Sacrament reposed in the tabernacle.

The wake is the appropriate time for members of the family and friends to share memories of the deceased or to pay tribute to the deceased. It is the appropriate time for the giving of a eulogy or eulogies. Also, it is the appropriate time to recall those things which were dear to the deceased through photographs and other objects, and through the singing of favorite songs.

Usually it is not possible for the priest to be present for the transfer of the body from the place of the wake to the church, when the wake is not held in the church. It is fitting that a deacon or Leader of Prayer be present for the transfer of the body. (*OCF*, Nos. 119-127; *and RNL*P, No. 19)

### ◆THE FUNERAL MASS

Every member of the faithful has the right to the Funeral Mass, except on the days prohibited by Church law. (Cf. *OCF*, No. 178) The body of the deceased member of the faithful should be brought to the Eucharistic Sacrifice one final time in order that the whole Church may pray that he or she who ate the Bread of Eternal life may now share in the eternal life of Heaven. The Funeral Mass should never be considered an accessory rite for the deceased but rather it should be considered, as it truly is, the heart of the funeral rites. (Cf. *OCF*, No. 128)

For a serious reason, in accord with the norm of Church law, the Funeral Mass or Funeral Liturgy may be denied. (Cf. Can. 1184)

If the member of the faithful had not been practicing the Catholic faith, especially if he or she without good cause had not been participating in the Sunday Eucharist, it may be more appropriate to celebrate the Funeral Liturgy outside of Mass. The judgment regarding the matter belongs to the parish priest. In this case, it is not inappropriate to have Masses offered for the eternal rest of the deceased.

If the funeral rites are conducted without a Mass, as is provided for in the *Order of Christian Funerals*, the Funeral Liturgy is reserved to the priest or deacon. This rite is intended for the use of priests when liturgical law prohibits a priest from celebrating the Funeral Mass, or when the priest is unable to celebrate the funeral rites and a deacon conducts them. (Cf. *OCF*, Nos. 183-203; *RNL*P, No. 20)

Today, it sometimes happens that the family of a very elderly relative who has few or no surviving relatives and friends decides that, since probably only a few of the faithful will participate in the Funeral Mass, it should be eliminated from the funeral rites. This is certainly erroneous thinking. First of all, no matter how few faithful participate in the Mass, it remains the solemn and efficacious prayer of the whole Church on behalf of the dead person, the Church's way of bringing to reverent burial her deceased member.

Secondly, members of the parish who are able should participate in the Funeral Mass, whether they knew well the deceased person or not. Participation in the Funeral Mass is, after all, not a question of a social

requirement but of carrying out in the fullest manner possible the spiritual work of mercy, "to pray for the dead."

An important part of the planning of the Funeral Mass is the choice of the readings from the Sacred Scriptures. The readings are to be chosen from those indicated in Part III of the *Order of Christian Funerals* (No. 344). Readings from sources other than the Sacred Scriptures are not permitted.

Sacred music should also be chosen for the Funeral Mass and other parts of the funeral rites, if possible. If at all possible, the parish should have the service of a cantor and of a choir or schola, so that the Funeral Mass may be celebrated with proper dignity. Singing for the Funeral Mass is a high form of prayer for the dead and a wonderful service offered to the family and friends of the deceased.

Sacred music is integral to the funeral rites. (Cf. *OCF*, No. 30) The music at the Funeral Mass is to be truly sacred. Sometimes, family members or friends desire that some secular song or music, which was favorite to the deceased, be sung or performed. The appropriate time for the singing or playing of any favorite secular music is the wake. It may not be introduced into the Funeral Mass, not even during the carrying of the body from the church at the end of the Mass.

The homily, which is reserved to the priest or deacon, opens up the Holy Scriptures to our understanding so that our faith may be strengthened and our hope nourished. The homily is not to be a eulogy. The *Order of Christian Funerals* tells us regarding the homily:

The homilist should also help the members of the assembly to understand that the mystery of God's love and the mystery of Jesus' victorious death and resurrection were present in the life and death of the deceased and that these mysteries are active in their own lives as well." (*OCF*, No. 27)

The central message of the homily is the mystery of the Redemption. In holding up this mystery for the faithful, the homilist will indicate signs of the redeeming love of God in the life of the deceased person.

Sometimes, family members or friends desire to express appreciation or to read a prayer or other inspirational text at the conclusion of the Funeral Mass or Funeral Liturgy. Words of appreciation or the reading of a prayer or inspirational prayer may take place after the Prayer after Communion and before the Final Commendation. (Cf. *OCF*, Nos. 170 and 197) Only one family member or friend is to speak, and he or she is to be brief, that is no longer than five minutes. In other words, the length of the remarks should be appropriate to the length of the entire rite. The words of appreciation are not to be a eulogy. Also, because of the intensity of the emotions at the time of the funeral, the words or prayer or inspirational text should be consigned to writing and shared in advance with the celebrant. Those who wish to give a eulogy fittingly do so during the wake.

The tradition of the parish offering a luncheon for those participating in the Funeral Mass or Funeral Liturgy is most commendable. The luncheon provides yet a further opportunity for those who are grieving to visit with one another and to encourage one another in faith and in hope. The funeral luncheon is a form of hospitality which is so much appreciated by the family and relatives of the deceased.

## ◆THE FINAL DISPOSITION OF THE BODY AND CREMATION

For many centuries, the Church did not permit the practice of cremation. First of all, cremation, which amounts to the artificial decomposition of the human body, does not fully represent the Christian symbolism of placing the body in the ground or in a mausoleum in anticipation of the resurrection on the Last Day. Secondly, some who despised the Church's teaching on the resurrection of the body chose cremation to express their disdain for the Church's teaching and to make a statement against faith in the Resurrection.

The use of cremation to call into question the Church's belief in the resurrection of the body is seemingly no longer common. Cremation has grown in popularity as a regular way to dispose of the body of the deceased, especially in places where interment or entombment is very difficult or economically prohibitive. For that reason, the Church has permitted cremation as long as it does not represent any lack of faith in the resurrection of the body. Whenever possible, however, the Church always prefers interment or entombment of the body because it gives fuller expression to our Christian faith.

When cremation is chosen, the preferred sequence for the funeral rites is the celebration of the Funeral Mass with the body of the deceased person present, then cremation, and then the interment or entombment of the cremated remains. Such a sequence respects the integrity of the funeral rites, and gives relatives and friends the occasion to pay proper respect to the body of the deceased before it is cremated.

In recent years, some have chosen to have the body of the deceased cremated immediately upon death. In such a case, the funeral rites are to be adapted according to the prescriptions of "Appendix 2" of the *Order of Christian Funerals*. (Cf. Nos. 422-425) It is preferable that the Rite of Committal with the Final Commendation be celebrated prior to the Funeral Mass or Funeral Liturgy. "Prayers which do not make reference to the honoring or burying of the body of the deceased should be chosen instead of those which have these themes." (*OCF*, No. 423) The Funeral Mass or Funeral Liturgy may be celebrated but without the Rite of Commendation and Committal, since these have already taken place.

Not infrequently, in such circumstances, family members have asked to bring the cremated remains to the church as a limited expression of respect for the remains of the deceased. The Bishops of the United States have studied the matter carefully. On November 12, 1996, the National Conference of Catholic Bishops approved an addition to the *Order of Christian Funerals* so that the cremated remains of the body could be present at the Funeral Mass or Funeral Liturgy. The Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments confirmed the decree of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops on July 30, 1997 (Prot. No. 1589/96/L). By his decree of August 15, 1997, the Most Reverend Anthony M. Pilla, then President of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops, ordered the publication of the appendix to the *Order of Christian Funerals* and permitted its use, effective October 4, 1997. By the same decree, its use became mandatory on November 2, 1997.

In accord with the just-noted decree, the celebration of the Funeral Mass or Funeral Liturgy in the presence of the cremated remains of the body of the deceased person is permitted in the dioceses of the United States of America under two conditions: 1) cremation must not be chosen for reasons contrary to the Church's teaching, in accord with the norm of can. 1176, § 3 of the *Code of Canon Law*; and 2) each diocesan bishop must judge the pastoral appropriateness of the practice. (Cf. *OCF*, No. 426)

Having considered carefully the pastoral situation in the Diocese of La Crosse and having responded to many requests for the presence of cremated remains at the Funeral Mass or Funeral Liturgy, I have judged the practice to be pastorally appropriate for our Diocese. By the present letter, I grant permission for the celebration of the Funeral Mass or Funeral Liturgy in the presence of the cremated remains of the deceased in the Diocese of La Crosse when cremation is chosen with due respect for the Church's teaching, especially the teaching regarding the resurrection of the body.

When this practice is employed in the Diocese of La Crosse, the following conditions are to be observed:

- 1) the cremated remains are to be brought to the Church in a worthy vessel, that is in a solid and durable container which is appropriately marked with the name of the deceased;
- 2) the vessel may be carried in the entrance procession or it may be put in place before the Funeral Mass or Funeral Liturgy begins; (Cf. *OCF*, No. 427)
- 3) the vessel is to be placed on a table in the same place in which the coffin is usually placed; (Cf. *Ibid.*)
- 4) the covering of the vessel with the pall is to be omitted; (Cf. *OCF*, No. 434)
- 5) the Funeral Mass or Funeral Liturgy is to be celebrated in accord with the *Roman Missal* and the special ritual prepared by the National Conference of Catholic Bishops; (Cf. *OCF*, No. 428)
- 6) texts should be chosen in view of the fact that the body of the deceased has been cremated and is not present; (Cf. *OCF*, Nos. 428-429)
- 7) in the Funeral Mass, the Rite of Final Commendation is to take place after the Prayer after Communion; in the Funeral Liturgy, the Rite of Final Commendation takes place after the Lord's Prayer;
- 8) the alternate form of the dismissal is to be used; (*OCF*, No. 437)
- 9) the Rite of Committal is to be celebrated at the cemetery, mausoleum or columbarium as soon as possible following the Funeral Mass or Funeral Liturgy, using the alternate form; (*OCF*, No. 438)
- 10) the cremated remains are to be buried in the ground or entombed in a mausoleum or columbarium;
- 11) the place of burial or entombment is to be memorialized appropriately.

With the growing practice of cremation, there has also developed a certain lack of care for the cremated remains of the dead. Funeral directors who have been asked to store the cremated remains report that those remains often are left unclaimed by family or friends. Those charged with the arrangements for the funeral rites of the deceased should see that the cremated remains are interred or entombed at the earliest possible time.

Cremated remains must be placed in a worthy vessel, and they must be interred or entombed. It is not permitted to scatter cremated remains over a favorite place, and it is not permitted to keep cremated remains in one's home or place other than a cemetery. (Cf. *OCF*, No. 417)

The integrity of the cremated remains is to be respected. The cremated remains of one deceased person may not be mixed with the cremated remains of another person. It is not permitted to divide the cremated remains and inter or entomb them in more than one place.

With regard to the practice of cremation, I highly recommend the study of a document of the Committee on the Liturgy of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops: *Reflections on the Body, Cremation, and Catholic Funeral Rites*, 1997 (Publication No. 5-033). The text of this document has been included in "Appendix 2" of the *Order of Christian Funerals* in its publication as a separate document.

With the more common use of cremation, the Church's preference for the burial or entombment of the body must be kept in mind, and due care must be taken to avoid any erosion of the faith regarding the resurrection of the body. (Cf. "Appendix 2;" and *OCF*, Nos. 413-414)

## ◆CONCLUSION

In closing, I express esteem and gratitude, in the name of all the faithful of the Diocese, to those who carry out the corporal work of mercy of burying the dead and the spiritual work of mercy of praying for the dead. As Bishop, I express heartfelt gratitude to funeral directors, cemetery workers, cemetery committees and associations, and all who serve our deceased brothers and sisters with full respect for the Church's teaching about death and the resurrection of the body. It is my hope that the reflections and directives contained in this letter will confirm your work and respond to the questions and concerns which come up in carrying out your noble service of the dead and of their families and friends.

Death for the faithful Christian is not annihilation but final passage to our lasting home with God in heaven. Our Lord Jesus Christ, by His Passion, Death and Resurrection, has won for us the victory which gives us the sure hope of life, body and soul, with God without end in Heaven.

In him [Jesus Christ our Lord], who rose from the dead, our hope of resurrection dawned.

The sadness of death gives way

to the bright promise of immortality.

Lord, for your faithful people life is changed, not ended. When the body of  
our earthly dwelling lies in death  
we gain an everlasting dwelling in heaven.

*(Roman Missal, Preface "Christian Death I")*

In this Great Jubilee of the Year 2000, we celebrate the beginning of our Redemption when God the Son took our human nature in the womb of the Virgin Mary. Our Redemption reached its completion when the Incarnate Redeemer won in our human nature the victory over sin and everlasting death by dying on the cross and rising from the dead. In every aspect of our care to pray for the dead and to bring the dead to reverent burial, we profess our faith in Jesus Christ, Lord of Earth and Heaven. Through our care in praying for the dead and in bringing them to reverent burial, the work of the new evangelization will be accomplished, the Gospel regarding death and the resurrection of the body will be proclaimed anew. With Saint Paul, we assure one another regarding the truth about life and about death:

As you well know, we have our citizenship in heaven; it is from there that we await the coming of our Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ. He will give a new form to this lowly body of ours and remake it according to the pattern of his glorified body, by his power to subject everything to himself. *(Phil 3, 20-21)*

As faithful disciples of Our Lord Jesus Christ, we profess our faith in the resurrection of the body as we await His return in glory on the Last Day.

May our celebration of the funeral rites always express our firm faith and sure hope in the resurrection of the body on the Last Day. May our prayers for the dead assist them on the final stage of their pilgrimage home to God the Father. May we prepare ourselves each day for our own death, praying that it may be happy and may bring us safely home to the Father.

Given at the offices of the Diocesan Curia on the second day of November, the Commemoration of All the Faithful Departed, in the Jubilee Year of Our Lord 2000.

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*Bishop of La Crosse*



*Chancellor*