

Cremation: Ashes to Ashes

(by Lou Jacquet (<http://www.catholicculture.org/culture/library/view.cfm?recnum=645>))

To judge by the box-office receipts, millions of Americans saw the final scene in the movie "The Bridges of Madison County." In it a son and daughter honor their mother's last request by scattering her ashes from a scenic Iowa bridge.

It's high drama, a powerful moment. Whatever else it might be, however, it would clearly not be a proper burial if the woman were Catholic.

The fact the woman was cremated is not the issue. Today many Catholics, in speaking with their parish priest about funeral arrangements for themselves or for a loved one, are sometimes surprised to learn the Church no longer forbids cremation. What [is often misunderstood however is the] Church's stipulation that cremated remains (called "cremains") must receive a proper burial in consecrated ground.

"You can't store Grandma on the mantel or scatter your father's ashes across the 13th green of his favorite golf course," advises Father Peter Polando, canon lawyer and pastor of St. Matthias Parish in Youngstown, Ohio. "The Church has strong feelings about the fact that this body has been a temple of the Holy Spirit and requires a proper [and respectful] burial as a result." [A burial also assists in the grieving process and ensures that the deceased loved one has a final resting place.]

By definitions supplied from funeral-industry literature, cremation is the process of reducing the body to bone fragments through the application of intense heat. The bone fragments are then pulverized, and placed within a temporary container before being returned to the family.

Catholic burial practice calls for the cremains to be buried in an urn within a consecrated grave or placed inside a mausoleum. Keeping ashes at home or scattering them on land or sea, even where legal, is inappropriate to the Church's deep reverence for the body as a place where the soul has resided. As the "Our Sunday Visitor's Catholic Encyclopedia" notes:

"Cremation was the normal custom in the ancient civilized world, except in Egypt, Judea and China. It was repugnant to early Christians because of the belief in the resurrection of the body. By the fifth century, cremation had been largely abandoned in the Roman Empire because of Christian influence."

These days, cremation has become more common in the United States among persons of various denominations.

The number of cremations is increasing for three main reasons. First, there is a growing shortage of burial spaces in some sections of the nation. Second, in a mobile society where many people move often, it's much simpler to transport ashes than a casket. Many elderly who live in the northern states, for example, winter in warmer climates. It's not unusual for them to leave instructions that, should they die there, their bodies are to be cremated and the remains flown home to be interred in the family burial plot. And a third reason is financial: a cremation typically costs significantly less than a full-scale burial in a casket.

[If cremation is part of one's desired final arrangements, when contacting the parish church to plan the appropriate funeral liturgies, the inurnment of the cremains will be scheduled also.]