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PROPER BURIAL OF OUR DECEASED BROTHERS AND SISTERS

"In sure and certain hope of the resurrection to eternal life through our Lord Jesus Christ, we commend to Almighty God our brother (sister) and we commit his (her) body to the ground: earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust. The Lord bless him (her) and keep him (her) and be gracious to him (her), the Lord lift up his countenance upon him (her) and give him (her) peace". (Funeral Rite: 219-B)

With the rise in the number of people opting to have their deceased loved ones cremated and the decrease in those who are practicing the Catholic faith, there is concern for the proper disposition of ashes. There are occasions in which Catholic families have requested funeral rites that are contrary to Catholic practice (wanting to scatter ashes on the ground or allowing families to retain cremains in their homes). As a Franciscan Priest, I must do as the Catholic Church instructs me to do when working with families as they prepare to celebrate the funeral services of their loved ones. In order that all may understand Church teaching, this document is shared with you.

Principles Regarding Cremation are simple – you are to treat the ashes in the same manner of sacredness and reverence for which you would the body of the deceased! Because the human body is integral to the human person, it is difficult to think of a person apart from their body. "Thus, the Roman Catholic Church's reverence and care for the body grows out of a reverence and concern for the person whom the Church now commends to the care of God." The long-standing practice of burying the body of the deceased in a grave or tomb or mausoleum continues to be encouraged as a sign of Christian faith.

The Church does not forbid cremation as a means of disposition of the body, unless it has been chosen for reasons which are contrary to Church teaching. Preference for the presence of the body at the Funeral remains the norm - The body of a deceased loved one forcefully brings to mind the mystery of life and death. As Christians, the body of the deceased speaks also to our belief that we are destined for future glory at the resurrection of the dead. Therefore "the Church clearly prefers and urges that the body of the deceased be present for its funeral rites, since the presence of the human body better expresses the values which the Church affirms in its rites."

When cremation is chosen, the Church prefers that the body be cremated after the Funeral, thus allowing for the presence of the body at the Funeral Mass. When circumstances require it, however, cremation may take place even before the Funeral liturgy. The Cremated Remains may be present at the Funeral Mass and blessed with Baptismal water at the opening rites. At the conclusion of the Funeral Rites, proper burial of the Cremated Remains is to take place. "Cremated Remains may be buried in a grave, entombed in a mausoleum or columbarium or even buried at sea." The phrase, "buried at sea," refers to a specific manner of encasing the ashes in a waterproof container and with all due reverence committed to the sea as if to the ground of a cemetery. The practice of scattering cremated remains on the sea, from the air, or on the ground is not permitted. Likewise, "keeping cremated remains in the home of a relative or friend of the deceased are not the reverent disposition that the Church requires." The ashes are to

remain together and not be split into multiple containers or fashioned into jewelry or any object of any kind. The principle of respect for the Cremated Remains of a deceased Christian mirrors the respect afforded their body. The body is always laid to rest with solemnity and dignity.

If you are aware of members of your family who have not properly interred the cremains of your beloved relatives or intend to do so, please share this document with them. It is out of respect for the relationship of the deceased with their eternal design that proper interment (burial) should be realized.

Note: All quotations are taken from the Order of Christian Funerals, Appendix: Cremation; 1997.

Very Rev. Thomas F. Stabile, T.O.R., V.F.
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