

In late summer, many Catholics gather in cemeteries to remember the dead, to pray, and to socialize. In early September, I will hold Sunday afternoon prayer services at Notre Dame Cemetery in Vanier and Hope Cemetery in Gloucester.

This communion with the dead seems peculiar to Catholics. Sometimes, it is misunderstood. Remembrance of the dead and reverence for their last resting place express the Christian's faith in the resurrection of the body.

Burying the dead conveys the inherent dignity we wish to show to the physical body. The body was the outward expression of the human person with whom people interacted and knew while they were here in this world.

The customs of funerals, wake services, and practices surrounding the deceased have been changing. In Europe and North America, cremation has surged in popularity. In many places, cremations far outstrip whole-body burials. There is a danger that some practices associated with cremation may diminish respect for the person and hope in the resurrection.

This recently led the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith to suggest guidelines for dealing with cremated remains.

Vatican officials indicated that the church continues to prefer the burial of human remains. Still, the Church permits cremation as a valid option, but argues against the scattering of ashes or keeping cremated remains at home.

The Church recognizes legitimate reasons for cremation, including sanitary, financial, or social conditions. However, the instruction states, "the ashes of the faithful must be laid to rest in a sacred place, that is, in a cemetery or, in certain cases, in a church or an area, which has

been set aside for this purpose, and so dedicated by the competent ecclesial authority.”

The Church recognizes that cremation itself does not contradict Catholic teaching on the soul’s immortality or the hope of the resurrection. Nonetheless, we must not fall prey to a variety of popular pretences that deny these truths.

Accordingly, the new instruction reminds the faithful to avoid public denial of the faith and “every appearance of pantheism, naturalism or nihilism.”

The Church sees that cremation can imply “erroneous ideas about death, such as considering death as the definitive annihilation of the person, or the moment of fusion with Mother Nature or the universe, or as a stage in the cycle of regeneration, or as the definitive liberation from the ‘prison’ of the body.”

The faithful should dispose of cremains appropriately. They must not scatter cremated ashes in the atmosphere or make them into jewellery or keepsakes. The human person’s dignity demands better treatment.

The burial of ashes or their reservation in a sacred place “ensures that they are not excluded from the prayers and remembrance of their family or the Christian community.” This is an essential practice of the Faith. Burying the cremains preserves the deceased’s memory and makes it easier for members of their family and the entire Christian community to remember them in prayer. It also prevents the possibility of “unfitting or superstitious practices.”

The deceased “remain part of the Church.” Often, when I am in Montreal, I visit my parents’ grave in Notre Dame-des-Neiges cemetery to pray in gratitude for them and with them.

The instruction tells us that the Church “continues to prefer the practice of burying the bodies of the deceased because this shows a greater esteem towards the deceased.”

All of the Church’s activities surrounding death and burial practices must proclaim the hope of the resurrection, the instruction says. It goes on to quote the early Church Father Tertullian: “The confidence of Christians is the resurrection of the dead; believing this we live.”