

November 2, 2014  
Feast of All Souls

### **Pastoral Letter to the Faithful Regarding Cremation**

Dear Catholic Faithful:

One fateful Sunday morning in Jerusalem, nearly two thousand years ago, the world changed forever – Jesus of Nazareth, after a crucifixion and death clearly witnessed by many, had risen from his tomb.

This was significant in many ways. First, it proved that Jesus was not simply a man, but the Son of God. He was not mad or crazy. He was God as He claimed. Second, this means that what Jesus said and did matters. He is not one wise man among many, but is Wisdom itself. Third, the Apostles clearly saw the Resurrected Jesus with a *kind of body*, a glorified body, one not limited by time or space, but one that could be touched and felt. This has implications for all those who follow Jesus faithfully as Christians and as Catholics.

In the ancient Roman and Greek world that surrounded Jesus, burning the body of the deceased was very common. The understanding was that the body was a burden, that upon death the body was discarded forever. In the early Church Christians were quickly seen as being strange in how they treated the remains of their loved ones after death – they did not burn the bodies. Rather they preserved them for burial. Since the risen Jesus had a “glorified body” so we will too, when our bodies rise at the second coming of Christ. The body – our bodies – matter.

And this is why I have written this letter to you, the Catholic faithful in the Diocese of Bismarck. In the month of November, Catholics traditionally pray for the dead, and this is an opportune time to clarify some matters around Catholic burial.

The Catholic Church is honored to assist all those who are bereaved and who come to her to bury their loved ones. The Church has always considered burying the dead a great duty, a sacred duty, and a work of mercy. However, the Church is given the task by Jesus to faithfully proclaim and protect what Jesus has revealed. *It has been the constant practice of the Church to hold that keeping the remains of the deceased in bodily form, whenever possible, best manifests faith in the bodily resurrection revealed by Jesus.*

As a Catholic you may be considering cremation for your loved one, or for yourself as you preplan. What follows are options for the Catholic, in descending order of preference by the Church:

1. Remains kept in bodily form at all funeral rites, including burial.
2. Remains kept in bodily form at the main funeral rites (e.g. vigil, funeral Mass, or simple liturgy of the Word), followed by cremation and then burial of all the cremated remains as would a body.
3. Remains are cremated immediately after death, with the cremated remains present at all funeral rites, followed by burial of all the cremated remains as would a body.

The last two options above can occur only when: a) cremation is not inspired by motives contrary to Christian teaching, and b) the cremated remains will be handled with respect and integrally (all of them) buried or entombed in a timely manner as would a body.

One may ask why the cremated remains cannot be separated amongst family or used for scattering, jewelry, kept in the home, or another novelty. The Church insists that all remains be treated with the same respect, whether a body or cremated remains. Just as one would not separate a body in parts amongst the surviving family, nor should the cremated remains be separated amongst the family. Just as one would not think of

permanently keeping a body in the home as a remembrance of the deceased, nor should the cremated remains be kept in the home. Just as one would not scatter a body across one's favorite landscape, nor should cremated remains be scattered. Cremation is already considered a compromise by the Church. It is not too much for the Church to insist that the cremated remains be treated with the same respect and dignity as would a body.

Assisting those who have lost a loved one and who come to the Church for comfort is one of the most rewarding experiences of being a priest or deacon. On behalf of our priests and deacons, I thank you for your love of Christ and His Church.

Wishing you every blessing, I remain

Sincerely Yours in Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "+1 David D. Kagan". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial 'D' and a long horizontal stroke at the end.

Most Reverend David D. Kagan, D.D., P.A., J.C.L.  
Bishop of Bismarck