

Catholic Cremation; A New Tradition In The Making

By Paul F. Rahill

So what exactly is a "tradition" anyway? If we look at the Webster's definition, tradition is *the handing down of statements, beliefs, legends, customs, information, etc., from generation to generation, especially by word of mouth or by practice*. So tradition is the beliefs and customs that we hand down from generation to generation. In my family with its long standing Catholic heritage, the "tradition" upon death is a full funeral Mass followed by cremation and memorialization. So cremation has, in three generations, become my family's funeral tradition, passed down with respect and dignity.

The concern for Catholics or any other religious group that advocates respect and dignity for the human vessel as it is prepared for final disposition is, with emerging traditions what exactly is being passed down?

Unless the Catholic cemeteries operate their own crematories, cremation will often involve outside providers for the actual cremation service and process. These outside providers most likely have established standards and procedures that may or may not coincide with what the church is looking for. Education of Catholic standards and procedures must be effectively communicated. What different standards should we expect, or rather, demand for Catholic cremation and why be different?

"The Catholic church has no inherited tradition with cremation; in order to make cremation "Catholic" we must make our practice of cremation entirely consistent with our sacred tradition of respect and reverence for the body as a temple of the Holy Spirit. The architectural design of our facilities should reflect this." (John J. O'Brien, CCCE, Past President NCCC)

(photo Assumption Catholic Cemetery and Cremation Centre, Archdiocese Toronto)



We must begin to build a cremation tradition that incorporates the Catholic funeral traditions, showing the same reverence for the cremation as we do for burials.

"Because we have so little Catholic experience with cremation, we find ourselves following the trends of the world around us. Despite our limited experience with this new opportunity, we do have a century's long funeral tradition to guide us." (Fr. Richard Rutherford)

Should following current trends and traditions be of concern for Catholics?
(CANA Disposition Survey 2006)

- 26% of persons being cremated (with identified religious affiliations) were Catholics
- 37% of persons cremated are taken to a cemetery for burial or placement in a niche or columbarium
- 61% of cremations performed were "direct cremations".
- 74% of cremations had no funeral service prior to cremation.
- 74% of crematories are open to "trade work" serving many different funeral homes and traditions.
- 86% of persons cremated are in cardboard boxes or...less.
- 59% of respondents say they would "dispose" of cremated remains by scattering (Wirthlin Worldwide)

There is obviously much work to do if the Catholic Church is to maintain their traditions of love, care, support and reverence. Standards will have to be discussed, debated and refined. Guidelines must be established and implemented and expectations will need to be conveyed through information, education and training.

There can be a bright side to this story. We will still have an opportunity to shape this new tradition of cremation to embrace the centuries-old Catholic Funeral Tradition, but we must be active and intentional leaders.

"Lead, follow or get out of the way" Thomas Paine (1737-1809)



Let's lead by establishing in our cemeteries cremation information and educational areas for funeral directors and families.

"Catholic funeral directors and cemetery personnel will likewise play a major role in helping to shape this new Catholic experience of cremation in continuity with our faith-filled tradition." (Fr. Richard Rutherford)

Funeral directors and families alike need to be educated on new Catholic cremation traditions. With approximately 84% of respondents saying they intend to pre-arrange their own funeral (Wirthlin Worldwide), education on Catholic cremation traditions is critical.

Funeral Directors are an important partner in this education process as they are typically the "first call" resource at the time of need, and the go to source for pre-arrangements of funerals. Approximately 50% of persons researching funeral options and information look to funeral directors as their primary source, and 94% of them use the internet to conduct research. (POLLARA study of consumer perceptions - Canada) Today's funeral consumer not only wants to better understand their choices through self-investigation, they want easier ways to select their choices.

What is it that we want to convey to the Catholic cremation consumer?

How about.....what a "model" Catholic cremation looks like from start to finish?

- Funeral Mass with casketed body present
- Family accompaniment to crematory
- Committal service in family area or chapel at crematory
- Cremation and placement of cremated remains in an urn
- Committal service with burial of the urn or placement into a niche at the cemetery
- Permanent memorialization of the loved one at the cemetery

How do the families (84% of who plan to pre-arrange) obtain this information?

Consumer research consistently tells us that we are not educating enough. Education on what a Catholic cremation is critical for ourselves, our industry and, of course, the families we serve.

Let's move from educational to operational. Another great guiding principle for us, respect, is found in the following quote.

"The Church has always expressed a belief the body should be treated with great respect and as a temple of the Holy Spirit" (From Catholics and Cremation - Questions, Issues and Answers)

Preparing ourselves to properly receive and process the body for cremation is also critical. In urban areas a high percentage of families may choose to accompany the bodies to the crematory. For those that cannot, an in-house van service to pick up the human remains and return the cremated remains may be beneficial to serve funeral homes that utilize the crematory.

More often than not, cremations are not processed immediately upon arrival to the crematory. Depending upon family choices, the bodies may or may not be embalmed. Until a cremation is ready to be processed, appropriate refrigerated and non-refrigerated holding options must be available.

We see with existing installations, families often choose to accompany the body to the crematory.



"The family gathering and viewing areas should be comfortable and well lit with appropriate furnishings and decoration conveying the sacred nature of the activities conducted therein" (John J. O'Brien CCCE, President NCCC)

This quote sums it all up: Comfortable, well-lit with appropriate furnishings and décor, conveying dignity, care and respect.

Family waiting and committal areas should be adjacent to the crematory, if possible, as they are often used for viewing into the crematory area.

Depending on the volume of cremations expected to be accommodated and whether or not committal in the cremation equipment area with a gathered family is necessary, a simple, moderate or high volume crematory area can be designed.



Cremation equipment selection is important to accommodate the number of cremations to be performed in a day. With the growth of cremation projected to double over the next 20 years, facility expansion should be anticipated which would allow for additional and or larger cremation equipment to be added when the volume and business plan warrants.

Organizing and operating a professional crematory requires the right facilities and quality cremation equipment, but we cannot stop there. Proper and professional training of the crematory operators is critical. We must always be in search of best practices, visit other crematories, attend useful meetings and learn from other industry professionals.

So it appears we have much work ahead of us, and it all begins with defining and refining Catholic cremation traditions, processes and procedures. Once that is complete, we can build these Catholic traditions into all aspects of crematorium design, equipping and implementation.

Paul Rahill is President of Matthews International Cremation Division, the largest designer and manufacturer of cremations systems worldwide. Paul can be reached at prahill@matw.com .