



*The Roman Catholic*  
*Diocese of Phoenix*

---

400 EAST MONROE, PHOENIX, ARIZONA 85004-2336 TELEPHONE (602) 257-0030  
OFFICE OF THE BISHOP

October 2012

My Dear Brothers in Christ,

Through the work of the Diocese of Phoenix Catholic Cemeteries and Mortuaries, a very helpful flyer has been developed, which is being made available for use throughout the Diocese to provide instruction on the Church's teaching on cremation. You may have already received a copy along with a letter from Mr. Gary Brown. I am also sending a letter, with a copy of the flyer, to the funeral directors, hospice directors and other key people in the communities of our Diocese who provide services to those who are making decisions regarding the final disposition of a person's remains in anticipation of or at the time of death.

I am writing to you today to provide guidance, as you are called to provide pastoral care to families who approach you with questions about cremation and what can or cannot be legitimately allowed. My hope is that by being well prepared yourself, you will be able to counsel families in a manner that will avoid conflict and promote the positive values of the Church, which properly honor the body and the life of the dead.

Everyone who is involved in providing pastoral ministry to those approaching death and to those who are making arrangements for a loved one who has died know how emotional those conversations can be. Often, pastoral ministers are called to respond to the needs of family members who sincerely wish to fulfill the desires of a loved one who has died, but are themselves not practicing Catholics. Not only do many of these people not know what the Church allows and why her values place restrictions on how cremated human remains are to be treated, they have been influenced in their thinking by secular influences, including sales personnel at some mortuaries, that may even romanticize practices that violate the Church's reverence for the remains of those who have died.

Ministry to families, when a loved one has died, can be an opportunity to evangelize and guide them back to active participation in the Church. I believe that when the Church is able to sensitively explain why, out of reverence for the person who has died, the Church places limits on the proper disposition of the person's remains, this will often be understood, accepted and appreciated.

There will be situations when people will make requests that cannot be accommodated and however much I hope that it can be avoided, parishes will have to inform people that, in light of the decisions that they are making, which contradict the teaching of the Church, it will not be possible to celebrate the rites of the Order of Christian Funerals.

Such decisions should never be made lightly or indiscriminately. Every effort must be made to assist those who approach our parishes for funeral rites to understand and come to affirm the Church's teachings, but I must acknowledge that there will be times when families may feel hurt because our parishes cannot accommodate their wishes.

The cremation flyer developed by Catholic Cemeteries and Mortuaries will be helpful, but let me make clear that parishes cannot be guilty of complicity in the disposition of cremated human remains that violate the teaching of the Church.

While it may be understandable that a family has good reasons for not burying or entombing a loved one's cremated remains as immediately as the Church desires, there must be the firm intention expressed, on the part of those making the arrangements that the final disposition of the remains will be in conformity with the teaching of the Church. If the intention of those making the arrangements is to scatter the ashes, or later comingle them when another person has died, or to separate a person's ashes into various items of memorialization, parishes will have to inform those who are making the arrangements that the Church cannot cooperate by allowing the funeral rites of the Church to be celebrated. The principle that can never be violated is that "The cremated remains of a body should be treated with the same respect given to the human body from which they come." (OCF #417)

That principle, which cannot be compromised when responding to requests from those approaching you for the funeral rites of the Church, is to ask yourself; would this request be suitable if the body was present rather than the person's cremated human remains?

While there is no way to avoid having some view the restrictions that the Church places on the disposition of cremated human remains to be insensitive or arbitrary, when people can be compassionately guided to understand that the Church's goal is to reverence the deceased person and honor their remains, for their body was truly a Temple of the Holy Spirit, I believe that the hearts of many will be moved to appreciate and affirm the teaching of the Church.

With gratitude for your pastoral charity and wisdom, and assuring you of my communion with you in prayer, I remain,

Sincerely yours in Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Thomas J. Olmsted". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

+ Thomas J. Olmsted  
Bishop of Phoenix