



REMATION

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To the Clergy and Faithful of the Diocese of Stamford

The world in which we live is changing. However, there are some things that must remain the same. What is true and what is absolute are those teachings that have been given to us by Jesus Christ. Divine truths are not subject to the whims of human intelligence. ✠

In the Book of Genesis¹ we are told that all of humanity is created in the image and likeness of God. This image is seen in our human form. Our human bodies are created by God. They are not something apart from us. They are an integral part of who and what we are as humans. Since some of the sins humanity creates are related to our physical side, so too then would some of the graces that we receive be related to our bodies. During different seasons of the Church year, we perform physical acts of sacrifice, such as metanias, fasting and abstinence. So our bodies then work for redemption.²

Bodily resurrection is seen in the Resurrection of Jesus. His body appeared to those who saw Him as truly a physical body. The men walking with Him on the road to Emmaus³ recognized Him only in the breaking of the bread. Surely, they would noticed, if he was some kind of disembodied spirit. A further example is found in the Gospel of John⁴ where after the resurrection Mary Magdalene thought the person at whom she was looking was the gardener when she was looking at the risen Lord. Jesus after His resurrection is truly man and as man has a human body. This body though is different in that it is not subject to the same laws of nature: for example, the ability to enter a locked room. For this reason we call the body after the resurrection, the glorified body. Jesus is the first fruit of the Resurrection and those who believe in Him in order to be raised to eternal life will also have a glorified body.

This theology enabled St. Cyril of Jerusalem to say, "He who believes that his body shall remain to rise again is careful of his robe."⁵ It is also for this reason that the body of a deceased person was treated with

¹ Genesis 1:26.

² Romans 8:23.

³ Luke 24: 13-35.

⁴ John 20:15.

⁵ Cyril of Jerusalem, *Catechetical Lectures*, XVIII, 1.

such respect. This body was a temple of the Holy Spirit. It was fed by the Bread of eternal life. It was washed in the waters of baptism and anointed with the holy oil of chrismation. Then when a person comes to the end of earthly existence, we pray "Grant rest, O God, to your servant and place him/her in paradise where the choirs of saints and the righteous shine like stars. O Lord, give rest to your departed servant..."⁶ "The liturgical rites of our church held in conjunction with a Christian burial are replete with liturgical actions and signs which express the inherent character of one 'sleeping', awaiting resurrection."⁷

Even death cannot rob a person of his dignity. As painful as death may be to the individual and the human community, we as Christians are confident that those who have "been baptized into Christ, have put on Christ"⁸ shall rise with Him. In the liturgy of the funeral, we pray "O God of spirits and all flesh, Who has conquered death and destroyed Satan..."⁹ We celebrate the salvific act of Christ in His death, and resurrection has saved the deceased. It is for this reason that we do not wear black, a color of mourning at our funerals. We wear a dark color to show our sorrow but one that has life in it.

The funeral service shows that death should not be feared but rather respected as a terminal from where we leave one place of our journey to go to another. We gather together to thank God for the gift of this person and to prayer that this life which had begun with God in baptism may now return to Him for all eternity.

"The constant pious practice among Christians of burying the bodies of the faithful departed has always been the object of solicitude on the part of the Church, shown both by providing it with appropriate rites to express clearly the symbolic and religious significance of burial, and by establishing penalties against those who attacked this salutary practice."¹⁰ Even with this pious practice though, the Church has accepted that in time of war, natural disaster, plague, or when necessary for public health, the burning of the remains of a deceased person was sometimes required and allowed to prevent the spread of disease.

"In some cultures, like that of the ancient Hebrews, cremation was especially deplored, since the burning of dead bodies was considered a shameful thing (Amos 2:1), a sign of disrespect and condemnation as when accompanying the death penalty (Lev. 20:14; Joshua 7:25), though permissible to save the bodies of the dead from desecration (I Sam 31:8-13)."¹¹ Later during the Middle Ages, some were cremated to show that they rejected the resurrection of the body. For these cultural reasons cremation was normally forbidden to members of our Church.

"However, such attitudes are no longer operative in many modern cultures. Practically no one in Western culture any longer considers

⁶ Hymns for the Deceased, tone 5.

⁷ Directives for the Philadelphia Metropolia, January 1986.

⁸ Baptismal tropar.

⁹ Panakhyda prayer.

¹⁰ The Holy Office, *Piam et Constantem*, May 8, 1963 (AAS 56 (1964) 822-823).

¹¹ Oriental Congregation, *Instruction on Cremation*, Prot # 125/97.

cremation unusual or disrespectful."¹² This is reflected in the new Code of Canon Law for the Eastern Churches, which states in Canon 876§3: "Those who choose cremation for their bodies, unless such a choice was made for reasons contrary to the conduct of Christian life, are to be granted an ecclesiastical funeral, provided that it does not obscure the preference of the Church for the burial of bodies and that scandal is avoided." This canon abrogates canon 480 of our Archeparchial Statutes which expressly forbade cremation.

Since October 18, 1990 cremation is permitted as a choice for a believing member of our church. It behooves for me to give some pastoral directions for the practice of cremation in the parishes of this diocese. Even in saying this, I would like to encourage all our faithful to make a choice of burial of the body over cremation.

First, "it is preferable to celebrate the funeral rites in the presence of the body of the deceased prior to cremation."¹³ The funeral would be conducted in the same manner as it would be if the choice were for burial. Following the services in the church, cremation would then take place. The entombment service for the ashes takes place at a date.

Second, "the cremated remains should be accorded the respect and dignity one accords the human body of the deceased."¹⁴ This includes the manner in which they are carried, the care and attention to appropriate placement and transport, and their final disposition. Unless otherwise directed by the Bishop, the remains should never be scattered on the ground in the sea, or in the air, or disposed of in any other manner, including keeping the remains in the home of a relative or friend. The remains should be accorded a dignified interment or entombment in a mausoleum or columbarium, preferably in a Catholic cemetery.

Third, the church must take every precaution that members of our own church who are ignorant of this development in understanding should not be scandalized by the practice. All priests are encouraged to "instruct the faithful in a positive way of appreciating the Catholic doctrine on the Divine Indwelling and the subsequent respect given to our bodies as Temples of the Holy Spirit and the strong tradition of our Church on these doctrines as evidenced in the moving liturgical services as the Parastas and the Office of Christian Burial."¹⁵ They should also make the faithful aware that as long as cremation "was not chosen because of the denial of Christian dogmas; or because of a sectarian spirit, or through hatred of the Catholic religion and the Church"¹⁶ it may be a choice in particular circumstances.

Scandal must always be avoided. This goes also to include the faithful of other Christian churches. In the west, most Christian churches have made allowances for cremation. This is not true in the East and in

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Directives for the Philadelphia Metropolia, January 1986.

¹⁶ Ibid.

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particular in the majority of Orthodox churches. The "danger of scandal to Orthodox brethren and even family members who might be attending the funeral services"¹⁷ alone would be sufficient reason to not choose cremation.

Keeping these principles in mind, when cremation is requested the pastor has my permission to grant the request as long as the cremation is to occur after services in the Church. If there is a doubt about the motivations of the deceased or survivors, the priest is to refer the matter to the Chancery.

However, when circumstances prevent the presence of the body, the priest is to investigate the reasons for the cremation and then make a judgment as to whether the reasons are valid and not related to those negative reasons mentioned above. The priest will then present a petition with his own recommendation to the Chancery for permission for ecclesiastical burial.¹⁸ The celebration of funeral rites after cremation, in the presence of the ashes of the deceased are allowed. The norm in this case is a Christian burial without any service in the church. This is the policy of this Eparchy and it may differ in other eparchies or particular churches. These guidelines remain in force until new directives are issued or until there is a directive for the entire metropolia.

This teaching is given so that the faithful and clergy of this Eparchy may understand the policy I am implementing concerning cremation. I wish to encourage our faithful in choosing burial over cremation, but I can accept that, for legitimate reasons, cremation may be selected. The purpose of this letter is to give an instruction so that there may be greater understanding of this sensitive and delicate matter.

Sincerely yours in Christ,



+ Basil

Bishop of Stamford

Given in Stamford
January 5, 1998

¹⁷ Oriental Congregation, *Instruction on Cremation*, Prot # 125/97.

¹⁸ Directives for the Philadelphia Metropolia, January 1986.