

The Armenian Apostolic Church on Cremation

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The question of the official position of our Church towards Cremation is a question that is on the mind of many of us these days, especially in the West, where cremation is the most economical kind of burial. Within 3 hours the corpse gets cremated into ashes, placed in a nicely decorated vase and presented to the relatives to do with it whatever they desire. Some families take the ashes of their beloved and sprinkle them into the ocean and others choose various different venues for the final disposition of the ashes of their beloved.

This message is not intended to offend or criticize those who have chosen cremation because it was the "will" of the deceased or something else. I'll begin with some biblical quotes in support of burying the dead, then I'll present the current views and opinions of the Roman Catholic Church, the Orthodox Church and I'll conclude with the position of the Armenian Apostolic Church.

With mankind's disobedience, God passed a severe judgment on the first humans, Adam and Eve. HE declared, "For dust you are and to dust you shall return" (Gen. 3:19). And ever since that day, death was part of the human experience. In the old Testament, we learn that God is enraged and fiercely agitated against Moab for burning to ashes the bones of Edom's king.(Amos 2:1). Ezekiel's vision about the valley of the dry bones is a divine prophecy about the resurrection of the dead (Ezekiel 37:1-14).

Now let us see what the New Testament tells us about this subject. We have all learned about the resurrection of Lazarus, where our Lord brought him to life after he was dead for four days. However, unlike Lazarus, on the Resurrection Day, humanity will be resurrected and will take on an imperishable body, for the apostle clearly states, "that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable." (1 Corinthians 15:50).

St. Paul in his epistle to 1 Corinthians 6:19 says, "Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore, honor God with your bodies." (1 Corinthians 6:19-20). Our bodies are truly temples of the Holy Spirit, which we have received from God and we must honor even unto death.

Christianity somehow has not prohibited or encouraged cremation. She believes in the resurrection of our bodies on the Judgement Day. St. Paul in his epistle to Corinthians has dedicated a whole chapter on this, where he says, "The first man Adam became a living being, the last Adam, a life-giving spirit. The spiritual did not come first. It was the natural, and after that the spiritual. The first man was of the dust of the earth; the second man is of heaven... We will not all sleep, but we will all be changed... For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. For the perishable must clothe itself with the imperishable, and the mortal with immortality."(1 Corinthians 15).

The Christian Church believes that our Lord ascended to heaven taking with Him our human nature, meaning to say, He went up to heaven with our human body, now glorified and imperishable. All this said, now let us turn our attention to Christian denominations and their stance on cremation.

The Roman Catholic Church, since Vatican II, in 1963, has allowed cremation. The canon code 1176, instructs the following, "3. The Church earnestly recommends that the pious custom of burying the bodies of the deceased be observed; nevertheless, the Church does not prohibit cremation unless it was chosen for reasons contrary to Christian doctrine." In 1997, the Catholic Church detailed the canon code with an appendix, according to which the deceased must be brought to church prior to cremation, a proper respect and a funeral service is performed and then allowed to be taken for cremation. However, after the cremation, the remains of the deceased must be buried under the soil.

The Orthodox Church does not have an official position on cremation. She neither prohibits it nor encourages it. Some Orthodox Churches reject cremation and others observe it in silence. The Orthodox Church does not see any 'vandalism' in cremation and believes that on the Judgement Day the human bodies will be reconstructed. Cremation, according to Orthodox practice, puts an end to the tradition of

Christian burial and to the respect towards the deceased.

The Armenian Apostolic Church neither prohibits cremation nor encourages it. However, according to the Armenian Apostolic Church, the deceased is a human spirit that has fallen asleep, based on the words of our Lord as He went to wake Lazarus up (John 11:11). The Armenian language has it as "Nunchetsyal" (fallen asleep) for the deceased. As the deceased is brought into church, he is positioned looking towards East and is buried in the position looking towards East, based on the Christian belief that Paradise was located in the East and the Savior shall come from the East. According to the Armenian Apostolic Church, the living Christian belongs to the Militant Church, while the deceased to the Triumphant Church, and these two regularly unite in glorifying God during the Holy Badarak.

The Armenian Apostolic Church has the definition of funeral as "Houghargavorutyun", meaning to escort, to accompany the fallen asleep to his/her final rest. Cremation does not give the deceased an escort to his/her final rest, the graveyard. Where the deceased is buried in a grave, prayed on and sealed until the day of resurrection.

Armenians have always shown respect towards their beloved ones who have departed from this world by giving them a proper burial and have immortalized their memory by erecting stones engraved with a cross and inscription. The Armenian Church, throughout its liturgical year, has assigned 5 specific days for the commemoration of the deceased, during which Armenians have an opportunity to visit their loved ones at the cemeteries, their final rest.

All this said, what should be done if in case the relatives of the deceased lack the means to care for the funeral expenses and have no other choice but to cremate their beloved one? Or what must be done if the deceased has left a "will" behind him instructing his beloved ones to have him cremated? The Armenian Church, as we said above, does not encourage cremation nor allows us to pray over the ashes of the deceased. The Armenian Church allows the deceased to be brought to the Church, to perform the funeral service over the deceased at the church, and if the deceased is to be cremated, here ends the responsibility of the Church. In the case where the body has already been cremated, the Armenian Church does not allow the performance of a funeral service.

In the absence of a body the Church cannot perform the funeral service at the church or seal a grave with cremated ashes of the deceased. The relatives of the deceased may request a requiem service for the repose of the soul of the deceased on the 7th and 40th day after his death.

There are those who claim that dust and ashes are one and the same and as God commanded, the human body is being reduced to ashes and dust be that in a crematorium or be it under the soil, what's the difference?

Yes, dust and ashes are one and the same, but the decomposition process under the soil takes longer and the bones are the ones that last the longest. Mother Nature has its role in nurturing the soil through the decomposition of a corpse while decomposition of the body through cremation is done within 3 hours and by fire.

Every day, archaeologists unearth cemeteries with complete skeletons of humans who have lived thousands of years ago, about whom now we know their history, their culture, their customs and traditions, their beliefs, how they lived, what they ate and how did they die. Through cremation, we are diminishing that opportunity of future scientists' knowledge about us.