

Can Cremated Remains be Incensed during the Final Commendation of the Funeral Mass?

Rev. Timothy M. Eck, STL-Lit.¹

Appendix II of the *Order of Christian Funerals with Cremation Rite* (OCF) contains the rubrics and modifications for the Funeral Liturgy when there are cremated remains present in the place of a body. OCF 428 indicates that the Funeral Mass is celebrated as normal according to the *Roman Missal* and the OCF. It further states that, “following the Prayer after Communion, the Rite of Final Commendation takes place. The alternate form for the dismissal is used.” This would indicate that everything in this section is as normal with the exception of the dismissal, which uses a modified text emphasizing the resurrection of the body.²

OCF 432-436 indicates the modifications for the reception of the remains in the case when there is no body, but instead cremated remains. The family and remains are still greeted in the usual way. (OCF 432) The cremated remains are then sprinkled with holy water, but with a different accompanying formula. (OCF 433) The procession is modified in the absence of a casket. There is no pall (OCF 434), and the priest and ministers proceed at the front of the procession directly to the altar, without placing a Christian Symbol. (OCF 435) The remains are then placed before the paschal candle like a body would be. (OCF 435) The liturgy then continues as normal. (OCF 436)

Given these indications for the reception of the remains, which retains the sprinkling with holy water, and that OCF 428 indicates that the Final Commendation continues as indicated in the

¹ Published at verbumcaro.com on August 7, 2022.

² Cf. OCF pg. 423.

Ritual (OCF 170-175) with the only modification coming at the end of the liturgy in the words of the dismissal, (OCF 437) it is therefore reasonable to incense the cremated remains.

The sprinkling of holy water upon the casket and the incensing of the casket have similar symbolism. The sprinkling at the beginning is “in remembrance of the deceased person’s initiation and first acceptance into the community of faithful.” (OCF 133) Then in the Final Commendation “the body may then be sprinkled with holy water and incense. [...] The sprinkling is a reminder that through Baptism the person was marked for eternal life and the incensation signifies respect for the body as the temple of the Holy Spirit.” (OCF 147) Therefore if we are to sprinkle the remains at the beginning, it is also reasonable to incense them at the end.

One might object that the cited paragraphs explicitly reference the *body*, and the Final Commendation only mentions a *coffin*. (OCF 173) However as mentioned above OCF 433 clearly states that the cremated remains are to be sprinkled with holy water and OCF 428 states that the ritual for the Final Commendation is to be followed, while making only one modification as previously noted. The apparent discrepancy in language stems from the fact that the ritual was not written with cremation in mind, as is noted in the Decree permitting funeral liturgies for cremated remains. (OCF pg. 417) As such the appendix includes all the adaptations required for a liturgy involving cremated remains. (OCF pg. 417) As noted in OCF 434, the appendix does indicate elements to be removed, while also stating that the liturgy otherwise should be as outlined in the normal rubrics. It says nothing concerning the incensation, and so the normal rubrics are in force. Similarly, the appendix does not provide *rubrical glosses* for every place the ritual normally says body or coffin, but instead trusts that the ministers will be able to mentally substitute cremated remains and urn when the rubrics provide instructions concerning the body or coffin. And so, the lack of the language *cremated remains* or *urn* in the main ritual should not be a cause of concern with regards to the incensation during the Final Commendation.

The last remaining question then is how would the remains be incensed? It is common that the coffin is incensed by walking around it while swinging the thurible. Since the urn is so much smaller, walking around the urn would seem a bit excessive. Instead, the customary three sets of double swings would seem dignified and sufficient.