

When Told What to Do, People Do It

By Daniel M. Isard

We are living through the most amazing of times as we watch our country go from being a burial-oriented society to being a cremation-oriented society. I say “amazing” because we are dealing with a sociological change that has been taking place for more than 5,000 years but has seen its popularity significantly increase in the last 25 years.

Cremation is not a new phenomenon. In my book on cremation, I identified that there is clear archeological proof that Greek and Macedonian cultures, 3,000 years before the birth of Christ, used cremation as a routine choice for helping a body transform to the next life. These people used cremation because their societal leaders told them to use it.

We know with the rise of Judaism, which forbade the use of cremation, the dominant societies used burial. The leaders of the early Jewish people used their religious beliefs to influence people to bury rather than cremate.

The Catholic Church did not allow cremation either, until the plague almost 1,300 years ago made the risk of burying churchgoers dangerous. Suddenly, the newest influence of people’s behavior allowed cremation (albeit for a limited period).

The modern cremation era started just after the World’s Fair in Philadelphia in 1876. There, organizers unveiled the first modern crematory. It was popular because many of the universalist religions springing up in New York blended cremation into Christian and other religions.

Cremation was not just a United States phenomenon. Protestant countries worldwide have embraced cremation while Catholic, Jewish and Muslim societies worldwide forbid it, for the most part. The Catholic Church worked to pass laws in Mexico making cremation a criminal offense. These laws existed until the late 1950s, but just because the criminality ended doesn’t mean that cremation began in earnest.

Since 1963, Catholics have been allowed to use cremation. The Catholic Church focused upon the disposition of the body as one point and the disposition of the cremated remains as another. Common practices included scattering or parsing cremated remains out to friends and relatives, as well as keeping the cremated remains in a common area such as a living room rather than a sacred place such as a cemetery. Of course, for the sake of the Catholic Church, not just any cemetery will do. It wants parishioners to inter the urn at a Catholic cemetery.

We are watching people learn about the concept of cremation. Based on the most recent 25-year timeline, with cremation increasing

from 10 to 50 percent (or more) of all deaths, I conclude that people in the U.S. like the concept of cremation more than burial. Watching the increased utilization tells me that we did not tell our families the truth.

Cremation is not the parallel service to burial, as in the question, “Do you want burial or cremation?” Cremation is the parallel service to embalming. Burial is the last disposition point and is somewhat equal in need for cremation as it is to a casketed embalmed body. Either way, we need an interment right placement. Whoever taught you to think that it is “burial or cremation” was wrong. We have to stop assuming these are the ultimate questions.

We – religious leaders, political leaders, community centers of influence, etc. – are the ones who tell families what their choices are. We motivate, cajole, move via guilt or influence using rewards of heaven or hell based upon someone’s conclusion on the disposition of their body (or that of a loved one).

In October 2016, the Catholic Church updated its cremation guidelines. The key issues are to avoid scattering cremated remains or even keeping them in an urn at home. The

guidelines forbid the dividing up of cremated remains or placing them in artwork or jewelry. The church wants the cremated remains to be placed in a sacred place, such as a church cemetery.

Prior to October 2016, we did work for cemetery and funeral home clients in strong Catholic communities in South Texas, North Jersey, Chicago and other places where there are well-identified Catholic funeral homes and/or Catholic Church cemeteries. Our experience was before then, only about 10 to 20 percent of all cremated remains were interred within a Catholic cemetery. Within a year of this guideline being published and the priests motivating

families of deceased and dying individuals, we saw interment of cremated remains increase to 50 percent in some markets and 65 percent in others. We saw many families who retained the urns bringing them to cemeteries for inurnment. This is another case of people doing what they are told to do.

Each of the past several years and for the next few to come, I have estimated there are about 200,000 families choosing cremation for the very first time. They go to the funeral home and tell you, "Dad just wanted to be cremated." Well, that consumer doesn't know what a cremation service is really akin to, do they? I

wonder what would happen if your staff said to those families, "That is fine. All of our services can be concluded with a cremation." Now, let the family know what options they have to choose from. When we get our clients to let families know their options, we immediately see an increase of convocations at the funeral home. Whether you call this a service, viewing or wake is marketing. It is a convocation or coming together of the mourners.

People do what they are motivated to do. Train your staff to teach their families what their options are and why some people choose those options. Educated consumers are the best kind of consumers. •

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