IS THE PRACTICE OF THROWING A HANDFUL OR SHOVEL-FULL OF SOIL INTO A GRAVE (UPON A CASKET, URN OR BURIAL VAULT) PERMITTED DURING THE CATHOLIC FUNERAL RITE? WHAT IS IT’S SIGNIFICANCE?

In short, the answer is: Yes. Placing soil in a grave during a funeral rite is a somber experience (rooted in Judaism) symbolizing a variety of cultural and religious meanings.

Many funeral ceremonies end with family members, relatives and close friends of the deceased throwing a handful of dirt or soil onto the coffin, urn or vault. This is a common practice that can be found across cultures. But what does this mean or signify?

Before leaving the cemetery, the deceased’s loved ones may toss a handful of dirt or soil on the coffin, urn or vault. Put simply, this is to symbolize that the deceased (like all of us) has returned to basic elements we all came from. Based on Old Testament scripture, every human being comes from the earth, and so after death naturally will be returned to the earth. Usually, a spouse or a close family member will be the first to throw dirt on the coffin, followed by others who were close to them.

_Ashes unto Ashes, Dust to Dust_

While it may be easy to believe the significance of this practice is solely religious, that is not always the case. It is also a great way of showing solidarity during times of mourning. Engaging in a common ritual such as this, allows people to come together and lean on each other for support during the difficult times of death, loss and absence. Throwing dirt into a open grave also allows those present for the funeral, to fully commit themselves to the service and understand the depth and meaning that such rituals hold.

_Throwing dirt on coffin, urn or vault in the Christian culture_

During a Christian burial, while dirt is being thrown on the coffin, the clergy or whoever is officiating the funeral service, may often say the phrase “ashes to ashes, dust to dust.” This recalls for all present that at death, the soul is released from the body, leaving behind the physical, mortal body to return to it’s basic elements, from which the world and creation were made as noted in the Book of Genesis.

Moreover, while exercising a Christian Corporal Work of Mercy (to bury the dead), throwing soil into the open grave also symbolizes that the deceased has been laid to their final resting place – the earth – while symbolically, leaving our final thoughts and prayers for and with the deceased person forever.

It is widely believed that this ritual is inspired by the early Egyptian’s practice of placing sand on the body of the deceased before they were buried.