

CREMATION, Questions & Answers:

The Catholic Church & the proper handling of ashes

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WASHINGTON, D.C. — **In 1963**, the Vatican Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith issued an instruction **permitting cremation** as long as it was not done as a sign of denial of the basic Christian belief in the resurrection of the dead.

The permission was incorporated into the Code of Canon Law in 1983 and the Code of Canons of the Eastern Churches in 1990.

However, Cardinal Gerhard Muller, prefect of the congregation, told reporters last fall that Church law had not specified exactly what should be done with “cremains,” and several bishops’ conferences asked the congregation to provide guidance.

That request led to **“*Ad resurgendum cum Christo*”** (“To Rise With Christ”), an instruction “regarding the burial of the deceased and the conservation of the ashes in the case of cremation,” issued Oct. 25, 2016. The document was approved by Pope Francis after consultation with other Vatican offices and with bishops’ conferences and the Eastern Churches’ synods of bishops.

Release of the new document has prompted many Catholics to ask whether it changes any regulations about cremation. Catholic News Service provided some of those questions to the staff of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops’ Secretariat of Divine Worship to have them answered:

Question: The new document from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith spells out regulations regarding cremation. Does it change anything in how the Church in this country has regulated this issue?

Answer: No, the new document from the CDF doesn’t change anything for us in this country. For example, we already have permission to have a funeral Mass in the presence of cremated remains. What the instruction

does do, however, is reiterate the Church's preference for the burial of the body in normal circumstances, and, when cremation is necessary, its insistence that the remains be properly interred.

Question: If the document says that traditional burial is preferred, does that mean cremation is wrong?

Answer: If the Church saw cremation as "wrong," it wouldn't permit it. Sometimes cremation can truly be necessary. However, the ancient custom and the preference of the Church is to bury the body, whenever possible.

Question: What should I do if I've already scattered the ashes?

Answer: We can't change the past, of course, and if you truly didn't realize at that time that it shouldn't be done, then you shouldn't burden yourself with guilt. Remember that what happens to a person's body after death has no bearing on what happens when that person's soul meets the Lord on judgment day. However, you might wish to offer extra prayers for the person's happy repose.

Question: If I plan to donate my body to science, after which it will be cremated, is that OK? What if the laboratory disposes of these ashes?

Answer: This would seem to be a valid reason for cremation. However, it would be important to make sure that arrangements are made for a funeral Mass, and that a trusted relative or friend is able to receive the remains and see to their proper burial.

Question: How do I convince my dad to let me bury my mother's ashes, which he now has at home?

Answer: Only you would know the best way to approach a situation like that, and it would depend a lot on his reasons for keeping the remains and on his own personal faith. Perhaps making him aware of the Church's preference would be enough to convince him? Or the assurance that his own earthly remains will one day be buried alongside those of his wife? Also, the Vatican's instruction itself articulates some compelling reasons: *"The reservation of the ashes of the departed in a sacred place ensures that they are not excluded from the prayers and remembrance of the Christian community. It prevents the faithful departed from being forgotten, or their remains from being shown a lack of respect..."* (5).

Question: Many people die and are never buried properly. Perhaps they die at sea or in an explosion or whatever. Why is the Vatican worried about something like this when there are so many other problems in the world?

Answer: This instruction isn't concerned with those kinds of situations. Burial at sea is necessary at times, as is cremation. The main purpose for this instruction is to help foster a healthy respect for the human body, even after death, especially in light of the move in recent years away from traditional burial in favor of more expedient and economical means. Where contemporary culture today may well question what difference it makes, the Church is reminding us to recall that the human body is an integral part of the human person deserving of respect even after death. The earliest Christians buried the bodies of their dead, and this set them apart from many of their contemporaries. We bury our dead out of reverence for God our Creator, and as a sign that we look forward to the resurrection on the last day.— **Catholic News Service** —

*'If cremation is desired for legitimate reasons, the Church **prefers** that the funeral liturgy occur before cremation.'*

How should a Catholic plan for cremation?

First, discuss your questions with a knowledgeable pastor or parish staff person.

Second, if your decision is to be cremated, make your wishes known in your will or in documents designed to help plan your funeral and burial. Provide copies of these documents to family members, your pastor, funeral home, or Catholic cemetery.

Lastly, as you plan, keep in mind the therapeutic value to your family of celebrating the full funeral liturgy with the body present.

When should cremation take place?

The Church **prefers** that cremation take place after the full funeral liturgy with the body. Sometimes, however, it is not possible for the body to be present for the funeral liturgy. When extraordinary circumstances make the cremation of the body the only feasible choice, pastoral sensitivity must be exercised by all who minister to the family of the deceased.

Think of cremation of the body and committal of the remains as the conclusion of a funeral with the body.

What does a Catholic do with the cremated remains after the funeral liturgy is completed?

The Church requires that the cremated remains be either buried in the ground in a cemetery or placed in a mausoleum or columbarium, preferably in a Catholic cemetery. It is also permissible to do water commitment as long as the ashes are kept in a container.

The Church recommends that the place of burial or entombment be permanently memorialized with a traditional memorial stone, crypt/niche front, or bronze plaque, minimally marking the name and dates of birth and death of the deceased person.

Since the human body was the temple of the Holy Spirit during life, was fed at the Eucharistic table, and will share in the bodily resurrection, contemporary cultural practices like scattering the cremated remains over water or from the air or keeping the cremated remains at home are not considered reverent forms of disposition that the Church requires. Other practices such as commingling cremated remains or dividing up cremated remains among family members or friends are not acceptable for Catholics.

— www.catholic-cemeteries.org —

Text of 'Ad resurgendum cum Christo' 2016

'The cremated remains of a body should be treated with the same respect given to the human body from which they come. This includes the use of a worthy vessel to contain the ashes, the manner in which they are carried, and the care and attention to appropriate placement and transport, and the final disposition. The cremated remains should be buried in a grave or entombed in a mausoleum or columbarium. The practice of scattering cremated remains on the sea, from the air, or on the ground, or keeping cremated remains at the home of a relative or friend of the deceased are not the reverent disposition that the Church requires.'

Order of Christian Funerals' Appendix on Cremation, no. 417