

GUIDANCE ON THE DISPOSITION OF CREMATED REMAINS

On July 5, 1963, the Instruction *Piam et Constantem* was published by the then Holy Office which permitted cremation as an alternative to burial for the disposition of the remains of deceased Catholics. Since then, this practice has been incorporated into the Code of Canon Law (1983) and the Code of Canons of Oriental Churches (1990).¹

There are several guidelines of note regarding cremation:

- 1) The ashes of the deceased are not to be scattered.²
- 2) The ashes are not to be separated and shared among family.^{3 4 7}
- 3) The ashes must be treated with the same respect and dignity as the human body and be housed in sacred places. This cements a core principle of our faith—the belief in resurrection.⁵ Additionally, housing cremated remains in such sacred places allows for the deceased to be prayed for when Masses are held at the cemetery.^{3 6}
- 4) The ashes must be kept separate and cannot be comingled. However, two bags of different cremated remains are permitted to be placed within a companion urn designed for such purpose.⁷
- 5) It is not permitted to retain the ashes of the departed in a residence, to include an interim period of time wherein a family may be waiting for a spouse to be placed along with the ashes of the departed in a companion urn.⁷

When cremated remains of the departed are present for the funeral, adaptations to the regular order of Mass can be made. Ideally, the preferred order for the funeral and interment should be as follows:

- A) A funeral liturgy at a Mass with the body present, so as to honor the “faithful departed who through Baptism have become temples of the Holy Spirit and in which ‘as instruments and vessels the Spirit has carried out so many good works.’”^{8 9 10}
- B) After the funeral Mass, the body is transported to a funeral home for cremation.
- C) Once cremated, “the ashes of the faithful must be laid to rest in a sacred place, that is, in a cemetery or, in certain cases, in a church or an area, which has been set aside for this purpose, and so dedicated by the competent ecclesial authority.”³ This may include appropriate entombment in a columbarium or ossuary. Such entombment should take place within a reasonable period of time following cremation.

An ossuary is “a defined and permanent sacred place [which] can be set aside for the commingled accumulation and preservation of the ashes of deceased baptized persons...”¹¹ While these ashes share a single space, they remain separated. In his letter dated December 9, 2023, Cardinal Victor Manuel Fernández, prefect of the Vatican’s Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith (DDF), stated that such a place must indicate “the identity of each person so as not to lose the memory of their names.”¹¹ A memorial plaque with names and relevant dates would meet this guidance and ensure the faithful departed are not excluded from the prayers and remembrance of their family or the Christian community.”¹²

Cardinal Fernández’s letter included guidance that, with the permission of ecclesiastical authority, the ashes of a relative could be retained by their family in a “place of significance for the history of the deceased person...”¹³

In the Catholic Diocese of Richmond, the decision has been made that this is not an acceptable practice. It remains the current policy that ashes cannot be separated.

¹ See paragraph 1 of the Instruction [“*Ad resurgendum cum Christo: Regarding the Burial of the Deceased and the Conservation of the Ashes in the Case of Cremation*”](#)

² See paragraph 7.

³ See paragraph 5.

⁴ Cf. *CIC*, can. 1176, § 3, can. 1205; *CCEO*, can. 876, § 3; can. 868.

⁵ See paragraph 2 of the Instruction [“*Ad resurgendum cum Christo: Regarding the Burial of the Deceased and the Conservation of the Ashes in the Case of Cremation*”](#)

⁶ See 2-3; [“*Note for the Audience with the Holy Father \(9 December 2023\) Reply to His Eminence, Cardinal Matteo Maria Zuppi, Archbishop of Bologna, Regarding Two Questions About the Preservation of the Ashes of the Deceased Following Cremation*”](#)

⁷ See paragraph 6 of the Instruction [“*Ad resurgendum cum Christo: Regarding the Burial of the Deceased and the Conservation of the Ashes in the Case of Cremation*”](#)

⁸ See paragraph 3.

⁹ St. Augustine, *De cura pro mortuis gerenda*, 3, 5: CSEL 41, 627.

¹⁰ See [“*United States Conference of Catholic Bishops: An Overview of Catholic Funeral Rites*”](#)

¹¹ See A); [“*Note for the Audience with the Holy Father \(9 December 2023\) Reply to His Eminence, Cardinal Matteo Maria Zuppi, Archbishop of Bologna, Regarding Two Questions About the Preservation of the Ashes of the Deceased Following Cremation*”](#)

¹² See 1).

¹³ See B).