

Vatican: Cremation ashes cannot be scattered, divvied up, or kept at home



VATICAN CITY - The Vatican has published guidelines for Catholics who want to be cremated, saying their remains cannot be scattered, divvied up or kept at home but rather stored in a sacred, church-approved place. The new instructions were released on October 25, 2016..

For most of its 2,000-year history, the Catholic Church only permitted burial, arguing that it best expressed the Christian hope in resurrection. But in 1963, the Vatican explicitly allowed cremation as long as it didn't suggest a denial of faith about resurrection.

The new document from the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith repeats that burial remains preferred, with officials calling cremation a "brutal destruction" of the body. But it lays out guidelines for conserving ashes for the increasing numbers of Catholics who choose cremation for economic, ecological or other reasons.

It said it was doing so to counter what it called "new ideas contrary to the church's faith" that had emerged since 1963, including New Age-y ideas that death is a "fusion" with Mother Nature and the universe, or the "definitive liberation" from the prison of the body.

To set the faithful straight, the Vatican said ashes and bone fragments cannot be kept at home, since that would deprive the Christian community as a whole of remembering the dead. Rather, church authorities should designate a sacred place, such as a cemetery or church area, to hold them.

Only in extraordinary cases can a bishop allow ashes to be kept at home, it said. Vatican officials declined to say what circumstances would qualify, but presumably countries where Catholics are a persecuted minority and where Catholic churches and cemeteries have been ransacked would qualify.

The document said remains cannot be divided among family members or put in lockets or other mementos. Nor can the ashes be scattered in the air, land or sea since doing so would give the appearance of “pantheism, naturalism or nihilism,” the guidelines said.

It repeated church teaching that Catholics who choose to be cremated for reasons contrary to the Christian faith must be denied a Christian funeral.

The new instruction carries an Aug. 15 date and says Pope Francis approved it March 18.

The author of the text, Cardinal Gerhard Mueller, was asked at a Vatican briefing if Francis had any reservations about the text, particularly the refusal to let family members keep remains of their loved ones at home.

“The dead body isn’t the private property of relatives, but rather a son of God who is part of the people of God,” Mueller said. “We have to get over this individualistic thinking.”

While the new instruction insists that remains be kept together, Vatican officials said they are not about to go gather up the various body parts of saints that are scattered in churches around the world. The practice of divvying up saints’ bodies for veneration - a hand here, a thigh bone there - was a fad centuries ago but is no longer in favor.

“Going to all the countries that have a hand of someone would start a war among the faithful,” reasoned Monsignor Angel Rodriguez Luno, a Vatican theological adviser.