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DICASTERIUM PRO DOCTRINA FIDEI

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**

In a letter dated 30 October 2023 (Prot. No. 2537), Cardinal Matteo Maria Zuppi, Archbishop of Bologna, addressed two questions to the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith regarding the preservation of the ashes of the deceased following cremation.

In particular, His Eminence reported that he had formed a commission in the Archdiocese of Bologna to give a Christian response to problems arising from the increasing number of people desiring to cremate the bodies of the deceased and scatter their ashes in nature. The commission also seeks to ensure that economic motivations (due to the lower cost of scattering ashes) do not prevail, and it seeks, moreover, to give indications regarding what to do with the ashes once the term for their preservation has expired.

To ensure correspondence not only with the requests of family members but, more importantly, with the Christian proclamation of the resurrection of the body and the respect due to it, the Archbishop of Bologna asked the following questions:

1. Taking into account the canonical prohibition against scattering the ashes of the deceased, is it possible to prepare a defined and permanent sacred place for the commingled accumulation and preservation of the ashes of the baptized, indicating the basic details of each person so as not to lose the memory of their names, similar to what occurs in ossuaries, where the mineralized remains of the deceased are cumulatively deposited and preserved?
2. Can a family be allowed to keep a portion of their family member's ashes in a place that is significant for the history of the deceased?

After giving due consideration to these questions, it was decided to answer them in the following way:

- 1) In paragraph 5 of the Instruction “[Ad resurgendum cum Christo: Regarding the Burial of the Deceased and the Conservation of the Ashes in the Case of Cremation](#)”, published by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith on 15 August 2016, the Congregation addresses the

question of preserving ashes in special urns. It states that ashes must be kept in a sacred place, such as a cemetery, or in an area dedicated to this purpose, provided that it has been so designated by the ecclesiastical authority.

Pastoral reasons for this regulation are also given: “The reservation of the ashes of the departed in a sacred place ensures that they are not excluded from the prayers and remembrance of their family or the Christian community. It prevents the faithful departed from being forgotten, or their remains from being shown a lack of respect, which eventuality is possible, most especially once the immediately subsequent generation has too passed away. Also it prevents any unfitting or superstitious practices” (par. 5). This regulation still retains all its validity.

2) Our faith tells us that we will be raised with the same bodily identity, which is material (like every creature on earth), even though that matter will be transfigured, freed from the limitations of this world. The resurrection will be “in this flesh in which we now live” (Formula “*Fides Damasi*”); in this way, any harmful dualism between the material and immaterial is avoided.

This transformation, however, does not imply the recuperation of the identical particles of matter that once formed the human being’s body. Therefore, the body of the resurrected person will not necessarily consist of the same elements that it had before it died. Since it is not a simple revivification of the corpse, the resurrection can occur even if the body has been totally destroyed or dispersed. This helps us understand why, in many cinerary urns, the ashes of the deceased are conserved together and are not stored separately.

3) The ashes of the deceased person, moreover, come from the material remains that were part of the person’s historical journey—so much so that the Church shows particular care and devotion concerning the relics of the saints. This attention and remembrance also leads us to have an attitude of sacred respect toward the ashes of the deceased, which we conserve in a sacred place suitable for prayer, sometimes located near the churches visited by the family and neighbors of the deceased.

4) Therefore:

A) For the reasons listed above, a defined and permanent sacred place can be set aside for the commingled accumulation and preservation of the ashes of deceased baptized persons, indicating the identity of each person so as not to lose the memory of their names.

B) In addition, the ecclesiastical authority, in compliance with current civil norms, may consider and evaluate a request by a family to preserve in an appropriate way a minimal part of the ashes of their relative in a place of significance for the history of the deceased person, provided that every type of pantheistic, naturalistic, or nihilistic misunderstanding is ruled out and also provided that the ashes of the deceased are kept in a sacred place.

Víctor Manuel Card. Fernández
Prefetto

Ex Audientia Die 9.12.2023

Franciscus