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Presentation of the Instruction *Ad resurgendum cum Christo* regarding the burial of the deceased and the conservation of the ashes in the case of cremation

This morning a press conference was held in the Holy See Press Office to present the Instruction from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith entitled *Ad resurgendum cum Christo*, regarding the burial of the deceased and the conservation of the ashes in the case of cremation. The panel was composed of Cardinal Gerhard Ludwig Müller, prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith; Fr. Serge-Thomas Bonino, O.P., secretary of the International Theological Commission; and Msgr. Angel Rodríguez Luño, consultor of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith.

The document, as Cardinal Müller noted, is addressed to the bishops of the Catholic Church, but directly regards the life of all faithful, in part since in many countries there has been a continual increase in the number of requests for cremation rather than burial, and it is likely that in the near future cremation will be considered a commonplace practice. This development is accompanied by another phenomenon: the conservation of ashes in domestic environments, as commemorative items or their dispersal in nature.

The ecclesiastical legislation on the cremation of cadavers is regulated by the Code of Canon Law, which states: "The Church earnestly recommends that the pious custom of burying the bodies of the deceased be observed; nevertheless, the Church does not prohibit cremation unless it was chosen for reasons contrary to Christian doctrine". "Here it is necessary to reveal that, despite this rule, the practice of cremation is significantly widespread also within the Catholic Church. With regard to the practice of conserving ashes, no specific canon law exists. For this reason, some episcopal conferences have addressed the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, raising troubling questions regarding the practices of conserving a funerary urn in the home or in places other than the cemetery, and especially that of dispersing ashes in nature".

"After consultation with the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, the Pontifical Council for Legislative Texts and numerous episcopal conferences and Synods of bishops of the Eastern Churches, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith considered it appropriate to publish a new Instruction with a dual aim: to reiterate the doctrinal and pastoral reasons for the preference for the burial of the dead, and secondly, to issue rules for guidance on the conservation of ashes in the case of cremation".

“The Church, first of all, continues to recommend strongly that the bodies of the deceased be buried in the cemetery or in another sacred place. In the remembrance of the death, burial and resurrection of the Lord, inhumation continues to be the most suitable form for expressing faith and the hope in bodily resurrection. Furthermore, the burial in cemeteries or other sacred places responds adequately to the piety and respect due to the bodies of the deceased faithful. Taking care of the bodies of the departed, the Church confirms her faith in resurrection and distances herself from attitudes and rites that see death as the definitive annulment of the person, a phase in the process of reincarnation or as a fusion of the soul with the universe”.

“If for legitimate reasons the decision is made to cremate a cadaver, the ashes of the faithful must be conserved in a sacred place, that is, in a cemetery or in a church, or in an area specifically dedicated for the purpose. The conservation of ashes in the home is not permitted. Only in the case of grave and exceptional circumstances, in agreement with the episcopal conference or the Synod of bishops, may permission be granted for the conservation of ashes in the domestic environment. To avoid any form of pantheistic, naturalistic or nihilistic misunderstanding, it is not permitted to scatter ashes in the air, on earth, in water or in any other way, or to convert the cremated ashes into any form of commemorative item”.

“It is hoped that this new Instruction may contribute to making Christian faithful more aware of their dignity as children of God. We are faced with a new challenge for the evangelisation of death. Acceptance on the part of the human person of being a creature, not destined for disappearance, demands that God is recognised as the origin and destiny of human existence: from the earth we come and to the earth we return, awaiting resurrection. It is therefore necessary to evangelise the meaning of death in the light of faith in the Risen Christ, ardent furnace of love, that purifies and recreates, awaiting the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come. As Tertullian wrote, ‘The resurrection of the dead is Christian men's confidence: by believing it we are what we claim to be’”.

Fr. Bonino, in his presentation, emphasised that the practice of burial, on account of its high anthropological and symbolic meaning, harmonises on the one hand with the mystery of resurrection and, on the other, with Christian teaching on the dignity of the human body.

“As affirmed in the Gospel accounts, between the pre-Paschal Jesus and the risen Jesus, there are simultaneously discontinuity and continuity. Discontinuity, because the body of Jesus after resurrection is in a new state and has properties that are no longer those of the body in its earthly condition, to the point that neither Mary Magdalene nor the disciples recognise Him. But at the same, the body of the risen Jesus is that body that was born of the Virgin Mary, crucified and buried, and bears the traces. ... Therefore, it is impossible to deny the real continuity between the buried body and the risen body, a sign that historical existence, both that of Jesus and our own, is not a game; it is not abolished by eschatology, but rather is transfigured. Christian resurrection is not therefore a reincarnation of the soul in an indifferent body; nor is it an *ex nihilo* recreation. The Church has never ceased to affirm that it is precisely the body in which we live and die that will be revived on the final day. Besides, it is the reason why the Christian people, guided by the *sensus fidei*, likes to venerate the relics of saints. These are not a simple memorial kept on a shelf, but are instead linked to the identity of the saint, once the Temple of the Holy Spirit, and await resurrection. Certainly, we are aware that even if the material continuity should be interrupted, as is the case in cremation, God is powerful enough to reconstitute our body precisely from our immortal soul alone, which guarantees the continuity of our identity between the moment of death and the moment of resurrection. But it remains that, at the symbolic level – and man is a symbolic animal – continuity is expressed in the most appropriate way by means of burial, ‘a grain of wheat [that] falls in to the earth’, rather than by cremation, which destroys the body brutally”.

“Christianity, religion of incarnation and resurrection, promotes what the Instruction calls ‘the great dignity of the human body as an integral part of the human person whose body forms part of their identity’. ... For Christian faith, the body is not all the person but it is an integral and essential part of his or her identity. Indeed, the body is like the sacrament of the soul that is expressed in it and by means of it. As such, the body forms part of the intrinsic dignity of the human person and the respect due to it. This is why burying the dead is, already in the Old Testament, one of the works of mercy with regard to one's neighbour. The integral ecology that the contemporary world yearns for should therefore begin with respecting the body, which is not an object for manipulation according to our will for power, but rather our humble companion for eternity”.

Msgr. Angel Rodríguez Luño, referring to the question of the scattering of ashes, remarked that it is a decision that “often depends on the idea that with death the human being is completely annihilated, as if it were its final destiny. At times it may even proceed from mere superficiality, from the desire to obscure or privatise that which refers to death, or from the spread of more than questionable tastes. It may be objected that in some case the decision to conserve in one’s own home the ashes of a dear departed relative (parent, wife, husband, child) is inspired by the desire for closeness and piety, that it facilitates memory and prayer. It is not the most frequent reason, but in some case it may be this way. There is, however, the risk that it may produce forgetfulness or lack of respect, especially once the first generation has passed, or may give rise to unhealthy forms of mourning. But above all it must be observed that the departed faithful form part of the Church, they are the object of prayer and commemoration by the living, and it is right that their remains be received by the Church and conserved with respect throughout the centuries in the places that the Church blesses for the purpose, without being removed from the memory and prayer of other relatives and the community”.
