

Can I have my ashes scattered in the Boundary Waters?

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Q: I am hoping to be cremated when I die. I would also like my family to bring my ashes up to the Boundary Waters and scatter them there, since it is where I feel closest to God. Is that OK?

A: Thank you so much for asking these questions. I am very grateful that you are taking the time to find out whether or not your plans and wishes correspond with what the church asks of those who are disciples of Jesus.

I do not want to gloss over that point: You are asking in order to live as a member of the Body of Christ. This is no small thing. We know that members of a family have a relationship with each other. Because of this relationship, they have certain rights. They can ask each other for help. They have a degree of access to each other. At the same time, real relationships also have real responsibilities. Because of this, the church can also ask things of her family members. This is where obedience comes in.

Obedience is not blind. Nor is obedience slavish. As Catholic Christians, we are called to have the obedience of loved and respected sons and daughters (who in turn love and respect those over us). Loved and respected sons and daughters can ask for the reasons behind what is being asked of them. Many of us do that. And then we are called to act on what we have been called to do.

I say all of this because your question indicates that you already have a desire to be cremated and for your ashes to be scattered. In the first case, that is permissible. In the second case, that is not allowed. Let me try to explain why.

You are your body. And you are your soul. In fact, one item of belief that distinguishes Christians from other religions and worldviews is our view of the human person. We believe that a human person is a body-soul “composite.” It is what we are. This is one of the reasons why death is so “obscene” (to use a phrase from Dr. Peter Kreeft): It is the separation of what is meant to be a unity.

A soul without a body is a ghost ... and a body without a soul is a corpse. A human person is the soul and body united. Therefore, you are your soul and you are your body. This belief is professed (even if obliquely) every time we utter the words, “I believe in the resurrection of the dead.” We believe that all of us will ultimately get our bodies back. Some of us to the resurrection of glory in heaven, and some of us to the resurrection of condemnation in hell.

All of these assertions add up to the fact that we care for our bodies even in death. Since we believe that our bodies are an essential part of our selves, and since we believe in the resurrection of the dead, we treat bodies (even dead bodies) with dignity.

For years, the church prohibited the cremation of dead bodies unless absolutely necessary. The reason behind this prohibition was the fact that many cultures the church was evangelizing had a vastly different view of the body. For many cultures and worldviews, the body has been seen as a “trap” or a “cage” for the soul. Therefore, death was seen as the liberation of the “true self” and cremation was seen as a sign that a person was finally freed from the shackles of their body. Because of this, Christians were not allowed to choose cremation, since the people around them could see it as a validation of their low view of the body.

Now, however, there are very few people who would associate cremation with this worldview. Far more people would choose cremation merely for its economic benefits or for some other personal reason. For this reason, the church allows people to choose cremation.

At the same time, the church demands that Catholics are interred in holy ground. Whether it is the body of the person or the cremains of the person, Catholics may only be buried in ground that has been designated for the purpose of burial. Therefore, Catholics may not scatter the ashes of deceased person who is Catholic, nor may they keep the ashes of a loved one in a vase or in a locket or other keepsake. This burial gives witness to the fact that the body is sacred and is destined for resurrection.

Of course, there are bodies that get lost at sea or are destroyed by fire or some other calamity. There are times when there is very little of a person’s body to recover and bury. But even then, whatever remains we can treat with dignity we will treat with dignity. Every person’s body will likely disintegrate and will become dust once again, but we affirm the resurrection when we do what we can to keep the body intact.

Many people will ask about the relics of saints. There are many saints whose bodies have been divided and distributed among the faithful. If a person can do that with a saint, why can't one do that with a loved one? For at least two reasons. First, the relic is placed in a reliquary and is meant to be regularly venerated (thus affirming the dignity of the body). Second, the church no longer approves of this practice, and it is prohibited unless special permission has been granted.

All of this is to say: if you want, you can choose cremation as long as you do not have the motive of minimizing the dignity of the body. But you may not ask for your ashes to be scattered. Hopefully enough reason why has been offered so that you can follow this teaching in good faith.