

Crematoriums can't guarantee '100%' purity of ashes, says funeral home operator

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MANILA, Philippines—With cremation becoming popular in the Philippines, people should ask crematoriums what they do to ensure that the ashes of their loved ones are not contaminated with those of other dead persons cremated earlier, the owner of a funeral parlor said Thursday.

Pablo Dayao, operator of the Dayao Funeral Homes in Galas, Quezon City, said crematoriums cannot realistically guarantee that their clients would be getting “100 percent” of the ashes of their cremated loved ones due to “incidental commingling,” particularly in the grinder that pulverizes the bones of a cremated body.

But an executive of another funeral home disputed Dayao’s claims about the commingling of ashes.

Dayao said that to avoid lawsuits, crematoriums in the United States inform their clients about the inability to guarantee the purity of a cremated person’s ashes because of the possibility of commingling with the ashes of somebody else, but this is not done in the Philippines.

“The public should know about this.... In the US, the families are even asked to sign [a waiver] that they know that they won’t be taking home 100 percent of the ashes of their loved ones,” said Dayao, who studied funeral services administration in Virginia.

“That is not done here. It is not mentioned,” added Dayao, whose funeral home does not have its own crematorium.

Dayao said that while crematoriums usually take great care in removing all the ashes before another cremation takes place, not all the ashes are removed, thus the possibility of the commingling of ashes, especially in the grinder.

“It is cleaned but would [crematoriums] remove all of [the grinder’s] parts, shake them, and thoroughly clean them before they have their next cremation?” he said.

“The law in the US says that the family should be informed that they won’t be getting 100 percent. They might get 99.9 percent but there would be .01 percent or even higher that belong to others,” Dayao said.

“This is important because there is one proposal (in the Manila city council) that pets that die should be cremated in the city crematory. But the city crematory is also used for human remains,” he added.

Rosemarie Cabunillas, vice president of the Philippine Mortuary Association, downplayed Dayao’s concerns.

“The ashes are scraped off the panel and we clean the grinder with a blower to ensure all ashes are removed. And before the next cremation, there is at least a one hour interval,” said Cabunillas, who is with the St. Ignatius Funeral Homes.

“He might be referring to (ordinary) dust [being commingled] with the ashes but for me, I can guarantee 100 percent because the bones, once pulverized, immediately go to the pouch,” she said.

Dayao said that cremation began to become popular in the country in the 1990s, with about 30 percent of his clients now choosing to be cremated rather than being buried.

“In one month, we would get up to 30 cases and five, seven or ten of these would choose cremation,” said Dayao, whose family has been in the funeral service business since the 1940s.

Dayao said one of the reasons cremation became popular was that the Catholic Church no longer forbids it. The Church was previously against the practice supposedly because denial of the Christian belief in the resurrection of the body was implicit in cremation.

However, the new Catechism of the Catholic Church says that cremation is allowed as long as it does not “demonstrate a denial of faith in the resurrection of the body.”

“Canon law is very clear on that. There is no prohibition on cremation,” said Msgr. Joselito Asis, secretary-general of the Catholic Bishops Conference of the Philippines.

He said that while canon law recommends the “pious custom of the burial,” it does not forbid cremation “unless this is chosen for reasons that are contrary to Christian teaching.”

The Church, however, frowns on the practice of scattering the ashes in the sea, air or ground after cremation or keeping them at home. It also does not approve of “apportioning” the ashes so that some are kept at home while another portion is kept in a columbarium.

“The cremated remains should be buried in a grave or columbarium. The urn should not be kept permanently at home or family altar,” Asis said.

The Church believes that just as the human body is not dismembered for burial, the cremated remains of a Christian should also be kept intact.

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