

Burying the Dead, Grieving Well

A Guide for Catholics on Bodily Disposition and Grief



Cover: Mosaic of the Entombment of Jesus in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, Jerusalem.
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Burying the Dead, Grieving Well: A Guide for Catholics on Bodily Disposition and Grief,
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Code: 185-183

ISBN: 978-0-88997-937-6

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Introduction



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1. Grieving the loss of a loved one is a painful yet fundamental part of the human condition. Our Lord himself was not spared this experience,¹ and Mary, our Blessed Mother, had her heart pierced with grief at the death of her Son.² Throughout human history, cultures and civilizations have developed rituals associated with death to accompany people during this inevitable grieving process. This is particularly true in the Catholic Church, which has long experience in accompanying its members through the difficult time surrounding the death of a loved one. The Church's funeral rites emphasize that our bodies, like Christ's, are destined for resurrection. By prompting us to look upon the body of the deceased, to recall the person's life, and to lay them to rest in a reverent way that manifests our resurrection faith, the Church helps us to grieve well and to accept and face the new reality before us.

1 Jn 11:35. Jesus wept upon hearing of the death of his friend Lazarus.

2 This great sorrow is symbolized by the image of the Sorrowful Heart of Mary, based on the words of Simeon to Mary (Lk 2:35): "and a sword will pierce your own soul too."

2. Today, Canadians are presented with the choice of numerous methods of bodily disposition: these can include burial, cremation, alkaline hydrolysis, or composting (see the Appendix for more information about alkaline hydrolysis and composting). Other methods will likely be available in the future. This resource is intended to help Catholics better understand these different options and in particular the way each relates to the natural process of bereavement and grieving. We will begin by considering the question of bodily disposition from the perspective of our Catholic faith. We will then examine it more specifically from the perspective of grieving, with help from the field of grief psychology. We will conclude with several suggestions for those involved in pastoral work as well as for Catholics who work in funeral and cemetery services.

Part I

Bodily Disposition:
The Faith Dimension

The Body: Destined for Resurrection

3. As Christians, our actions and way of living are meant to manifest our faith.

We believe that our earthly bodies will one day be raised up by God and elevated to a new kind of existence where we will live with God, body and soul, forever and ever.³ Because our bodies are destined for eternal glory, we are to treat them with honour and respect during our earthly life.

Photo: The Picture Art Collection / Alamy Stock Photo



The Raising of Lazarus, Anonymous, 6th century. Basilica mosaic Sant'Apollinare Nuovo, Ravenna, Italy.

4. Yet the honour and respect owed to each human body does not cease with death. Rather, our treatment of the bodies of the deceased is meant to continue to show the respect owed to what was the temple of the Holy Spirit and to what will again—in the resurrection on the Last Day—be the glorified body of the person we loved, indwelt with God's presence. This is why the Church encourages the practice of traditional burial, privileging it over other forms of bodily disposition.⁴ In burial, the body is laid to rest, calling to mind Saint Paul's image of the body that will rise as the seed that is sown into

the ground and dies, only to be reborn (1 Cor 15:35–49). Our earthly bodies will thus follow the pattern set by Christ himself in his death, burial, and resurrection, which was foreshadowed by the Lord raising Lazarus and others from the dead.⁵

3 Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC)* 989: “We firmly believe, and hence we hope that, just as Christ is truly risen from the dead and lives for ever, so after death the righteous will live for ever with the risen Christ and he will raise them up on the last day”; CCC 990: “The term ‘flesh’ refers to man in his state of weakness and mortality. The ‘resurrection of the flesh’ (the literal formulation of the Apostles’ Creed) means not only that the immortal soul will live on after death, but that even our ‘mortal body’ will come to life again”; CCC 999: “Christ is raised with his own body: ‘See my hands and my feet, that it is I myself’; but he did not return to an earthly life. So, in him, ‘all of them will rise again with their own bodies which they now bear,’ but Christ ‘will change our lowly body to be like his glorious body,’ into a ‘spiritual body.’”

4 Cf. *Code of Canon Law*, can. 1176 §3: “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.”

5 The raising of Lazarus is recounted in Jn 11:1–44. Jesus also raised the dead son of the widow of Nain (Lk 7:11–17) and the daughter of Jairus (Lk 8:48–56).

With natural burial, the body is left to the natural process of decay, but the body is not deliberately and directly destroyed, nor violated to transform it into something else.



Photo: iStock.com/_june

5. With cremation, the body is reduced to ashes by artificial processes. When chosen for economic or other legitimate reasons, it is accepted by the Church, for no process can reduce the body to a state from which God cannot raise it up again.⁶ Nonetheless, in the disposition of the bodies of the deceased, Catholics must be attentive to the appearance and meaning of the method used. Cremation itself would be unacceptable if it were chosen in order to annihilate the body or to defy the Church's teaching. Further, any method whose aim is to transform the body into a kind of "product" to be displayed or shared as a souvenir does not respect the body's inherent dignity.

6 Cf. St. Augustine, "The Enchiridion on Faith, Hope, and Charity." In *On Christian Belief*, translated by Bruce Harbert. Vol. I/8 of *The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century*, edited by Boniface Ramsey, 263–343 (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2005), n. 23.88. "Nor does the earthly material from which mortal flesh is created perish in the sight of God, but whatever dust or ashes it may dissolve into, whatever vapors or winds it may vanish into, whatever other bodies or even elements it may be turned into, by whatever animals or even men it may have been eaten as food and so turned into flesh, in an instant of time it returns to the human soul that first gave it life so that it might become human, grow, and live."

This is the reason it is recommended that cremated remains not “be preserved in mementos, pieces of jewellery or other objects,”⁷ but rather should be laid to rest in a place appropriate for the recollection of that person’s life.

The Human Body: Worthy of Respect

The Temple of the Holy Spirit

Photo: iStock.com/PaoloGaetano



Assumption of the Virgin Mary, mosaic by Francesco Zucchi, Basilica of Santa Maria In Aracoeli, Rome, Italy.

6. In his first letter to the Corinthians, Saint Paul tells us: “do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God, and that you are not your own?” (1 Cor 6:19). A church, like a temple, is consecrated as a special place for the presence of God. Even if it is closed and sold, it is considered a kind of sacrilege for a former church to be used for anything disrespectful of human dignity.⁸ Similarly, through baptism our bodies become dwelling places for the Holy Spirit. Because of this incomparable dignity, they are respected even after death. The perfect example of this dignity is the Blessed Virgin Mary, who at the end of her earthly life “was assumed, body and soul, into heavenly glory.”⁹ As the temple of the Holy Spirit par excellence, Mary’s body, like her Son’s, already shares in the glory of the resurrection that is the destiny of all Christ’s faithful.

7 Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Ad Resurgendum cum Christo* (2016), n. 7.

8 *Code of Canon Law*, 1222 §1: “If a church cannot be used in any way for divine worship and there is no possibility of repairing it, the diocesan bishop can relegate it to profane [i.e., non-religious] but not sordid use.”

9 Pius XII, *Munificentissimus Deus* (1950), n. 44.

The Body: Place of Good Works

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7. It is in the body that we live our earthly lives and glorify God. The hands with which we care for others, the lips and tongue with which we pray and praise God, and all the parts of our body have their role to play in our lives and, ultimately, in the working out of our salvation. This is why Saint Paul calls each of us to “glorify God in your body” (1 Cor 6:20).

Burying the Dead: A Corporal Work of Mercy



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Mosaic of the Entombment of Jesus in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, Jerusalem.

8. It may seem curious to recall that one of the corporal (i.e., bodily) works of mercy is burying the dead.¹⁰ After all, how can one show “mercy” to someone who is no longer alive? Yet, the body, even after death, remains connected in a mysterious way to the person who lived, even if the soul has departed. To provide for the burial of and dignified treatment for the bodies of the deceased is a work of mercy.

10 Cf. CCC 2447.

Just as we see the face of Christ in the poor and the least of these, so when we bury the dead we imitate the examples of Joseph of Arimathea, who saw to Jesus' burial,¹¹ as well as the women who prepared the Lord's body.¹² When cremation is chosen, "the cremated remains of the deceased are to be treated with the same reverence that is given to the body of the deceased."¹³

9. The practice of showing respect for the bodies of the dead by assuring their dignified burial is also found throughout the Old Testament, which recounts the important preparations made for the burials of people such as Sarah,¹⁴ Jacob,¹⁵ Joseph,¹⁶ and Moses.¹⁷ It also tells how God rewarded David for burying the bones of Saul, his son Jonathan, and others who had been David's enemies.¹⁸ We also read of the good character of Tobit, who took great care to bury the bodies of those who had been killed and abandoned.¹⁹

Organ Donation

10. In some cases, part of the body of the deceased may not be laid to rest but instead will provide the gift of life to another. The donation of organs, when carried out altruistically and in an ethically acceptable way, is a profound example of giving of oneself to extend or improve the life of another. This generous act, which reaches out beyond one's death, is a beautiful expression of the dignity of the human body.²⁰

11 Mt 27:57–60; Mk 15:42–46; Lk 23:50–53; Jn 19:38–42.

12 Mk 16:1; Lk 23:56.

13 *Order of Christian Funerals: Supplement for Celebrations with Cremated Remains* (Ottawa: CCCB, 2018), n. 627.

14 Gen 23:1–20. Abraham buys a field exclusively for the purpose of burying Sarah, his wife.

15 Gen 50:1–14. Joseph has his father Jacob embalmed according to Egyptian custom and buries him in a tomb that Jacob himself had prepared in the same field, in the land of Canaan, which Abraham had purchased to bury Sarah (the mother of Jacob).

16 Gen 50:24–26. Before dying, Joseph asks that his bones be brought to the Promised Land when the time comes and buried there.

17 Deut 34:5–6. Moses dies in Moab and is buried there.

18 2 Sam 21:12–14.

19 Tobit 1:16–18; 2:3–4.

20 Cf. John Paul II, *Evangelium Vitae* (1995), n. 86.

The Body and Praying for the Dead

11. The chief spiritual purpose of a Catholic funeral is to worship God while praying for the deceased and entrusting him or her to the mercy of God.²¹ This prayer is most appropriate and, indeed, most natural in the presence of the body of the deceased. This is why the Church's funeral liturgy makes frequent reference to its presence. During the Liturgy for Gathering in the Presence of the Body, the celebrant states: "The Lord God lives in his holy temple yet abides in our midst. Since in Baptism N. became God's temple and the Spirit of God lived in him (her), with reverence we bless his (her) mortal body."²² Likewise, in the rite of committal, the priest blesses the grave and then prays: "As we bury here the body of our brother (sister), deliver his (her) soul from every bond of sin, that he (she) may rejoice in you with your saints for ever."²³

Even if the body to be buried has already been cremated, the prayers of committal emphasize the presence of the person's remains:

Because God has chosen to call our brother (sister) N. from this life to himself, we commit his (her) remains to the earth [or: to their resting place], for we are dust and unto dust we shall return. But the Lord Jesus will raise us up from the dust of the earth and recreate our bodies to be like his own in glory, for he is risen, the firstborn from the dead.²⁴

12. The Church's living Tradition attests to the importance of the presence of the body during the various stages of the funeral. When cremation is chosen, the undivided remains must likewise be present during the funeral liturgy and be laid to rest in a single suitable location.²⁵

21 The fundamental reason we pray for the dead is so that they might be purified "so as to achieve the holiness necessary to enter the joy of heaven" (CCC 1030).

22 "Gathering in the Presence of the Body," in *Order of Christian Funerals* (CCCB: Ottawa, 2016), 33.

23 "Short Rite of Committal," in *Order of Christian Funerals*, n. 403.

24 "Prayers of Committal ('B')," in *Order of Christian Funerals: Supplement for Celebrations with Cremated Remains*, 58.

25 Although in the past, the remains of holy men and women were sometimes divided to facilitate their veneration in different places as relics, today this practice is highly restricted. Cf. Congregation for the Causes of Saints, Instruction "Relics in the Church: Authenticity and Preservation" (2017), art. 24.

Part II

Bodily Disposition
and Grieving

13. Now that we have reviewed the doctrinal and theological background to Catholic teaching on the treatment of the bodies of the deceased, we will discuss the role played by the Church's funeral rites and teaching on bodily disposition in the process of grieving and healing after the death of a loved one. During this tumultuous time, having a set ritual provides a firm footing on which to grieve.

The Structure of Catholic Funeral Rites

The Church's funeral rites normally consist of three moments or "stages" in the presence of the body or cremated remains.

1. Vigil Service (Wake)

14. The Vigil Service is carried out in the presence of the body, usually at the funeral home. More and more often, this service is done in the presence of cremated remains. It can include a Liturgy of the Word. "At the vigil, the Christian community keeps watch with the family in prayer to the God of mercy and finds strength in Christ's presence."²⁶ This is also a time to recall, with family and friends, the life of the departed person. A eulogy, if one is planned, would normally take place during the Vigil Service.²⁷ This time of prayer sometimes takes place on the day of the funeral liturgy, before the liturgy begins.

2. Funeral Liturgy

15. The Catholic funeral liturgy is ideally a Eucharistic liturgy, although it may also be a Liturgy of the Word. This liturgy recalls Christ's victory over death and commends the deceased to the mercy of God. In this way, the funeral liturgy invites the faithful to live the mystery of death not only as a loss or a rupture but as a "crossing over" prefigured by the Exodus and by Christ's Paschal Mystery. This is a particularly appropriate occasion to boldly proclaim the faith of the Church: the death and resurrection of Christ, the continued

26 *Order of Christian Funerals*, n. 84.

27 Sometimes a reception is held following the funeral Mass. This might also be an appropriate place for a eulogy.

existence of the person beyond this earthly life, our expectation of the resurrection of the dead and eternal life with God, the Communion of Saints, and the meaning of prayer for the final purification of the dead. The funeral liturgy involves welcoming loved ones and the assembled community, listening to the word of God, thanksgiving (with or without Mass), prayer, and the final commendation to entrust the deceased to the Lord in the hope of meeting them again in the Kingdom. The rite of final commendation may take place at the cemetery in cases where the whole assembly is gathered there for the disposition of the bodily remains.



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3. Rite of Committal

16. The final prayers are carried out at the place where the bodily remains are to be interred or deposited (usually a cemetery or mausoleum). In this final act of the Church's funeral rites, we commit the body of the deceased to its final resting place in expectation of the resurrection on the Last Day.

Grieving: An Ongoing Process

17. Through all three of these stages, the Church helps the bereaved initiate the important process of grieving the loss of their loved one. Experts in grieving remind us that after the death of a loved one, it is not a simple question of saying goodbye and ending our relationship with the deceased. Grief is an unavoidable process, a set of natural emotions that cannot be buried or circumvented. If we do not allow these emotions to be expressed in healthy ways, they will emerge in other ways. The goal, therefore, is not to avoid grief but to grieve well. The funeral rites are an important way to start this process on the right foot.



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18. As Catholics, we hope that those who have died in Christ live on as part of the Communion of Saints. All those redeemed and saved by Christ continue to live in him; death is not the end but a transformation. As the Church’s liturgy proclaims: “for your faithful, Lord, life is changed not ended, and, when this earthly dwelling turns to dust, an eternal dwelling is made ready for them in heaven.”²⁸ We may therefore continue to offer prayers for our deceased loved ones. It is not surprising, then, that modern grief studies have revealed that whatever a person’s faith, we continue to maintain bonds or relationships with those who have died. Their lives have become part of ours, and although death fundamentally changes our relationship with them, that bond does not end. We honour this fact by recognizing that grief is an ongoing process through which we adjust to the new reality of our relationship with the deceased.

28 “Preface I For the Dead,” *Roman Missal* (Ottawa: CCCB, 2011), 598.

19. Unfortunately, popular culture often seeks to avoid grief or to cover it up. While a “celebration of life” to commemorate the deceased can have important value and may be a worthwhile undertaking, when used as a substitute for a funeral it does a great disservice to those who have lost a loved one since it provides no guidance in the unavoidable grieving process. Even when someone dies at a ripe old age, a certain amount of grieving is required. Celebration does not preclude grief; in many cases, both can coexist in a healthy way.

20. We have considered the importance of grieving well; let us now explore several ways in which the Church’s funeral rites help us do this.

Recognizing the Reality of Death

21. The dominant Western culture often idealizes power, beauty, and autonomy. Old age, infirmity, and death are inconvenient truths that are often concealed or ignored. Yet, this denial of death is short-sighted and ultimately destructive. How can we know how to live if we do not acknowledge the end of our life? In a consumer and hedonist culture that constantly sells us health, beauty, and prosperity, the jarring reality of death can be a powerful wake-up call. Seeing the dead body of a loved one can help us take stock of our lives and reconsider what is truly essential and important.

22. “The Church’s rituals assist with the process of healing and recovery for those left behind. To deny the reality of death will have consequences for the bereaved in physical, spiritual and emotional ways.”²⁹ The viewing of the body of the deceased—particularly during the Vigil Service but also immediately prior to the funeral liturgy—helps us process psychologically that our loved one has really died. Sometimes, mourners who have not seen the body eventually have difficulty accepting the reality of their loss. Seeing with one’s own eyes the body of a loved one is a massive step in the grief process. It makes the loss real and allows the rest of the grieving process to begin.

29 *Order of Christian Funerals: Supplement for Celebrations with Cremated Remains*, n. 621.



Commemoration and Remembrance

23. The departed are still connected to us.³⁰ These connections exist on the level of memories—even memories that may need healing—as well as on the spiritual level, as we are part of the Body of Christ. The Church’s funeral rites and burial traditions help us to commemorate the departed and to create a space where their lives can be remembered. In many cases, family members and friends may not have seen the deceased for some time. Seeing the body during the funeral rites can trigger memories and aid in recollecting the gift that the deceased person was. It can likewise help stimulate conversations with others about the deceased, aiding in the communal act of remembering.

30 *CCC*, n. 962: “We believe in the communion of all the faithful of Christ, those who are pilgrims on earth, the dead who are being purified, and the blessed in heaven, all together forming one Church; and we believe that in this communion, the merciful love of God and his saints is always [attentive] to our prayers.”

24. The importance of commemoration and remembrance is perhaps most clearly upheld by the Church's insistence that the person's mortal remains be buried, undivided, in a sacred location – usually a cemetery or mausoleum. Some more recent trends, however, are concerning. One is the growth of so-called nostalgic disposition, in which bodily (usually cremated) remains are disposed of in a way that evokes the memory of the deceased (such as at a golf course, a family cottage, or a body of water). Another is the creation of jewellery or other objects containing the cremated remains of the deceased person. In such cases, there is no final resting place that people can visit to recall the person's memory. This is especially true when these remains are scattered rather than being buried in a single location. What is at stake is the right of loved ones to have a concrete location to come and remember the person who has died, over against easy, expedient, and economical solutions like scattering the remains in nature. The Bishops of Quebec have identified many of the pastoral problems that are encountered when Catholics do not treat cremated remains according to the guidelines of the Church.³¹ These include an inability to recognize that the loved one has really died, distress over the lack of a place to visit the loved one's remains, guilt over the way a loved one's cremated remains were disposed of, and strife within families due to disagreements over the remains.

Photo: iStock.com/Rawpixel



31 Assembly of Catholic Bishops of Quebec, *On the Necessity of Regulations Concerning the Disposition of the Ashes of the Deceased*, Brief presented to the Minister of Health and Social Services, October 2010.

25. Similarly, recent years have seen the growth of what is sometimes called “immediate disposition,” in which the body of the deceased may be immediately retrieved from a long-term care home by the funeral home, cremated, and the cremated remains provided directly to the next of kin. Although funeral homes will generally provide, upon the family’s request, a brief private viewing of the body prior to cremation, the practice of immediate disposition tends to short-circuit the funerary and grieving process. It is not surprising that in many cases, family members regret the lost opportunity to spend valuable time with the body and to say their farewells.

26. Although the practice is still relatively new, we would expect that similar problems could result from the use of alkaline hydrolysis, particularly in cases where a family member may have agreed to the process before fully realizing what is involved (see the Appendix to this Guide). Families normally want to know that they treated the body of their loved one in a dignified way. It therefore does not seem likely that the use of alkaline hydrolysis or any other method that does not treat the body with dignity could play a constructive role in a healthy grieving process.

Part III

**Bodily Disposition:
Pastoral Suggestions**

27. We have arrived at the pastoral dimension with respect to Catholic teaching on bodily disposition and grieving. In this section, we offer several suggestions to pastors, funeral and cemetery professionals, and the Catholic faithful. Many pastoral concerns surrounding death, dying, and funeral rites are beyond the scope of the suggestions in this Guide. Our intent is to guide Catholics to celebrate meaningful ceremonies that commemorate their loved one and to grieve well. These suggestions are in addition to the helpful and practical suggestions found in the General Introduction to the *Order of Christian Funerals*, nn. 1–20, with which pastors should already be familiar.

Suggestions for Pastors and Funeral Home Professionals

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28. Navigating the death of a loved one can be a new experience for many. Most people rely heavily on the guidance of the funeral home staff, cemetery staff, and (hopefully) their parish priest, whose influence in helping the faithful grieve cannot be underestimated. These suggestions are for them.

The Need for Ongoing Catechesis

29. Under the pressure of the moment, it is often difficult to deal with all the considerations that arise from the death of a loved one. The bereaved are often unprepared for the decisions and experiences they will encounter in planning a funeral liturgy and burial. Many Catholics today have not heard the Church's teaching in this area and may therefore make decisions, sometimes in advance, without taking it into account. The brief and often emotionally charged times of encounter following the death of a loved one are not always ideal moments for catechesis. This is why it is so important that ongoing formation and catechesis be provided to the Catholic faithful to help them make the best choices possible when they are faced with the death of a loved one.

Don't Rush Funerals or Burials

30. Because of their important role in the grieving process, the funeral rites must not be rushed. Encourage families to take time with the body, including having extended hours of visitation prior to the funeral. Although there has been a growing trend toward omitting the Vigil, it is an important occasion for family and friends to gather, remember the deceased, and begin the grieving process. “The Vigil is an integral moment in the pastoral care for the living and is not to be omitted.”³²

31. Taking extra time provides a better opportunity for the family to be supported by others, as well as to process more fully the reality of what is occurring. Although families may sometimes simply want to get things over with, encourage them to do it right and take it slow.

Have the Body Present

32. If the deceased person did not specify their wishes, encourage the family to keep the body present during the funeral rites. Ideally, the body will be present during the Vigil Service, the funeral Mass, and the burial. If cremation is chosen, encourage a period of visitation before or during the Vigil Service, before cremation occurs. If the family is open to the possibility, suggest that cremation be carried out after the funeral Mass, allowing the body to be carried forward and present during the liturgy.³³

The Value of the Eucharistic Celebration

33. When a faithful attendee of Mass at the parish dies without leaving explicit funeral directives, sometimes his or her family requests a funeral with no Mass. In such cases, while respecting the right of the family to make such a request, pastors are invited to help the family members see things from the point of view of their deceased loved one who treasured the Holy Eucharist. To prevent difficult situations from arising, consider reminding parishioners of the importance of writing down their wishes for their own funeral and ensuring these are communicated to their families.

32 *Order of Christian Funerals: Supplement for Celebrations with Cremated Remains*, n. 619.

33 “It is recommended that cremation take place following the celebration of the Funeral Liturgy.” *Order of Christian Funerals: Supplement for Celebrations with Cremated Remains*, n. 623.



A funeral Mass manifests in a unique way our Christian faith in the resurrection. In a sense, the Mass is the greatest gift we can give the deceased, because it is the offering of Christ himself. “From the beginning the Church has honored the memory of the dead and offered prayers in suffrage for them, above all the Eucharistic sacrifice, so that, thus purified, they may attain the beatific vision of God.”³⁴ Nonetheless, keep in mind that even if there is no funeral Mass, a Mass may be celebrated for the deceased at another appropriate time.³⁵

34 *CCC*, n. 1032.

35 There are various reasons for not celebrating a funeral Mass: the most common pastoral reason is that the family would not be able to actively participate in the Eucharistic liturgy. The lack of priests in certain regions often makes the celebration of a Mass impossible at the time of the funeral.



The Importance of a Final Resting Place

34. While they may not be conscious of it at the time, the burial of the deceased can be of great benefit to the family and loved ones. Having a sacred place to return to and to recall the memory of the deceased is important and can be very helpful in the grieving process. Reminding the family of these benefits is a good way to help them to understand the Church's teaching against scattering cremated remains.

Attending the Burial / Graveside Ceremony

35. Despite its great importance, fewer and fewer faithful today attend the burial ceremony. Remind those present at the funeral Mass that the funeral rites include several stages, concluding with the laying to rest of the body or cremated remains. Encourage them to attend the burial as the end of the funeral rites. Seeing the body or cremated remains finally laid to rest is of benefit to all those who grieve.

Suggestions for Catholic Cemeteries

Green Burials

36. Some Catholic faithful may be attracted to alternative methods of bodily disposition, such as alkaline hydrolysis, which are presented as ecologically friendlier options. In this regard, Catholic cemeteries may wish to consider offering “green” or “natural” burials. This newer form of burial is in fact similar to older burial practices and is completely accepted by the Catholic Church.³⁶ It generally involves the use of organic embalming fluid and burial in a biodegradable casket or a shroud. Often, these burials take place in a section of the cemetery that is left in its natural state.

Photo: Maryrest Cemetery, Mahwah, New Jersey, Archdiocese of Newark.



36 A leading example in this regard is Maryrest Cemetery, a ministry of the Archdiocese of Newark, New Jersey. <https://www.rcancem.org/catholic-green-burial/>

Burials for Children Who Die before Birth

37. Unborn children who die through miscarriage or even direct abortion are human beings deserving the dignity of a proper burial. According to Catholic teaching, their bodies should be laid to rest in a cemetery, when possible. Many Catholic cemeteries provide services, often free of charge or at low cost, for the burial of early gestation infants. This is usually in a dedicated section of the cemetery rather than in an individual plot. Allowing grieving parents to lay their child to rest in the consecrated ground of a cemetery is an important service to assist in the grieving of the family as well as a vibrant witness to the humanity of the unborn. Where such burial options do not yet exist, they should be established whenever possible.

Suggestions for Parishes

Bereavement Ministry

38. Many parishes have teams of volunteers who provide support to those who are grieving the loss of a loved one. This could be through helping with funeral arrangements, accompanying the bereaved, and offering prayers. These teams should be present in parishes when circumstances allow it. It is also suggested that bereavement teams consider reconnecting with the bereaved several months after the death, as this is a time when many other forms of support may diminish. Basic guidelines for the parish community's support of the bereaved are found in the General Introduction to the *Order of Christian Funerals*, nn. 9–10.



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It is also recommended that, particularly in parishes with young families, groups be set up to provide bereavement support to parents who experience the loss of a child through miscarriage. Such a loss is often invisible but no less real.

Suggestions for Catholics

39. Your own funeral is important. Do not neglect it. Prayerfully consider your wishes regarding your funeral and communicate them clearly to your family. For the greatest certainty, put them in writing. Not only will this ensure that your wishes are respected, but it will reduce the likelihood of quarrelling among family members over the details of your funeral and disposition. You may want to make advance preparations with a funeral home and cemetery, which can include pre-payment for the funeral services and burial plot. If you do so, share this information with your family.

Conclusion



Photo: iStock.com/mammuth

40. The way we lay to rest the bodies of our loved ones is full of meaning. The Church's vision of the end of earthly life, particularly as expressed through its funeral rites, manifests a great respect for the body, the temple of the Holy Spirit. Rather than giving in to passing, inauthentic fads that can short-circuit the inevitable grieving process, when we reverently lay our loved ones to rest we can grieve and celebrate them well.

Appendix

Problems with Some Forms of Bodily Disposition

1. In light of the insights presented in this Guide, readers will recognize that not all possible forms of bodily disposition equally express the Church’s belief in the dignity of the body and the Church’s hope in the body’s future resurrection.

Alkaline Hydrolysis

2. The practice known as alkaline hydrolysis (sometimes marketed under the trademarks “Resomation” or “Aquamation”) emerged so recently that neither the Holy Father nor the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith has made an official statement on it. However, where it has been considered by episcopal conferences, it has not been encouraged, including by the CCCB Commission for Doctrine in 2018:

[In] alkaline hydrolysis . . . the body of the deceased is placed in a metal cylinder and dissolved in a chemical bath, leaving only bone fragments similar to those resulting from cremation. The resulting effluent is then flushed into the local sewer system, while the remaining bone fragments are dried, ground and placed in an urn for the family of the deceased, as is the case with cremation.

The process of alkaline hydrolysis is currently being marketed as a “green” and ecologically friendly alternative to cremation, since it consumes less energy and does not release toxic chemicals into the atmosphere. However, the claim that it is ecologically superior is currently disputed. It is now available in a growing number of Canadian provinces.

Our research leads this Commission to the opinion that alkaline hydrolysis does not manifest adequate respect for the dignity of the human body as proclaimed by the faith of the Church. This is primarily due to the fact that, apart from bone residue, the remnants of the entire body are disposed of in the sewer system. It is further compounded by the fact that, in the operation of certain alkaline hydrolysis machines, the machine operator may first be required to puncture or crush the skull of the deceased in order to ensure the complete digestion of soft tissues. This adds another indignity to the body.³⁷

37 CCCB Episcopal Commission for Doctrine, “Statement on Alkaline Hydrolysis,” July 31, 2018.

Scattering Cremated Remains

3. As noted above, Catholics may choose cremation – which in Canada is now used more often than traditional burial – provided this choice does not represent a rejection of Catholic teaching on the resurrection of the body. However, in these cases, “the ashes of the faithful must be laid to rest in a sacred place, that is, in a cemetery or, in certain cases, in a church or an area which has been set aside for this purpose.”³⁸

4. The scattering of the cremated remains, as a symbolic action, does not represent the Church’s expectation that the body, laid to rest, will rise again. Although the intentions of individuals who choose this option may vary (being connected to the memory of the deceased, their favourite places or activities, etc.), the action itself implies a deliberate dis-integration of the body and not any expectation of resurrection. In some cases, it may also imply a sort of “recycling” of the physical components of the body by returning them to nature. However, as the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith states, “In order that every appearance of pantheism, naturalism or nihilism be avoided, it is not permitted to scatter the ashes of the faithful departed in the air, on land, at sea or in some other way . . . These courses of action cannot be legitimised by an appeal to the sanitary, social, or economic motives that may have occasioned the choice of cremation.”³⁹

Human Composting

5. Human composting generally refers to methods whereby the body is placed in a heat- and humidity-controlled chamber along with organic matter such as wood chips to accelerate the normal process of decomposition. Rather than producing ashes, the procedure reduces the body to about one cubic yard of soil in 30 days. The resulting soil or compost is then returned to the family or deposited in nature.

6. Several concerns arise from this method of disposition, which in 2019 was legalized in the State of Washington (the first jurisdiction in the world to do so). Unlike cremation, in which a relatively small urn is returned to the family, this process generates a volume of remains 200 to 300 times higher than cremation,⁴⁰

38 Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Ad Resurgendum cum Christo*, n. 5.

39 Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Ad Resurgendum cum Christo*, n. 7.

40 Total volume of cremated remains is usually 2.5L to 4L, compared to 765L in a cubic yard.

making reverent disposition very difficult, if not impossible. For this reason, the process appears to be designed to promote scattering or spreading of the remains, or even their use in gardening. In this case, the intent does not appear to be to lay the body to rest but to rapidly eliminate it and possibly promote what the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith criticizes as erroneous ideas about death, “such as considering death as the definitive annihilation of the person, or the moment of fusion with Mother Nature or the universe, or as a stage in the cycle of regeneration.”⁴¹

7. For these reasons, the Catholic Bishops of Washington State did not support the bill that legalized this process: “The bill allowed the resulting material to be used as ordinary compost. The Catholic Church believes that disposing of human remains in such manner fails to show enough respect for the body of the deceased.”⁴²

41 Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Ad Resurgendum cum Christo*, n. 3.

42 Washington State Catholic Conference, *Statement on Human Composting Bill*, May 22, 2019.



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