

ON THE PROPER DISPOSITION OF BODILY REMAINS

Committee on Doctrine
United States Conference of Catholic Bishops

1. “But now Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep. For since death came through a human being, the resurrection of the dead came also through a human being. For just as in Adam all die, so too in Christ shall all be brought to life” (1 Cor 15:20-22). Enlightened by this Easter faith in the resurrection of the dead, the Church has always taught that we must respect the bodies of the deceased. Every human being has been created “in the image of God” (Gn 1:26-27) and has an inherent dignity and worth. Human bodiliness is an essential aspect of this “image and likeness,” for through the body the human person’s spiritual nature manifests itself.

2. Since every man and woman is a unity of body and soul, respect for the person necessarily includes respect for the body.

Being a unity of body and soul, humanity concentrates in its physical dimension the elements of the material world, which reach their peak in the human and raise their voice in free praise of the creator. Women and men may not therefore despise their bodily life, but on the contrary are bound to consider the body, created by God and to be raised on the last day, as good and worthy of honour.¹

The body is not something that is used temporarily by the soul as a tool and that can ultimately be discarded as no longer useful. Jesus Christ has promised that one day, at the Final Resurrection, the souls of the dead will be reunited with their bodies. Jesus himself did not leave behind his body in the tomb, but rather rose from the dead “with his own body”² in a glorified state and then ascended into heaven in that body. He is seated even now at the right hand of the Father in his glorified body and will return again in that body at the end of time.

¹ Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 14.

² *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 999 (https://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/_P2H.HTM).

PROPER DISPOSITION: BURIAL AND CREMATION

3. Burial is considered by the Church to be the most appropriate way of manifesting reverence and respect for the body of the deceased because it “honors the children of God, who are temples of the Holy Spirit”³ and clearly expresses our faith and hope in the resurrection of the body. As for cremation, the Church permits the practice “unless it was chosen for reasons contrary to Christian doctrine.”⁴ The preferred method for honoring the remains of the dead, however, remains burial of the human body: “The Church earnestly recommends that the pious custom of burying the bodies of the deceased be observed.”⁵ Accompanying the body itself to the place of its rest reaffirms in the hearts and minds of believers the faith of the Church that it is *this* body that will rise.

4. In recent years, newer methods and technologies for disposition of the bodies of the deceased have been developed and presented as alternatives to both traditional burial and cremation. A number of these newer methods and technologies pose serious problems in that they fail to manifest the respect for last remains that Catholic faith requires. The basic principles necessary for evaluating these methods can be found in the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith’s Instruction regarding the Burial of the Deceased and the Conservation of the Ashes in the Case of Cremation (*Ad resurgendum cum Christo*).⁶

5. In this Instruction, the Congregation reiterates the Church’s preference for burial of the human body: “In memory of the death, burial and resurrection of the Lord, the mystery that

³ *Catechism of the Church*, no. 2300 (https://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/_P80.HTM).

⁴ *Code of Canon Law*, can. 1176 §3. Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 2301 (https://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/_P80.HTM).

⁵ *Code of Canon Law*, can. 1176 §3.

⁶ Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Instruction *Ad resurgendum cum Christo* regarding the Burial of the Deceased and the Conservation of the Ashes in the Case of Cremation (15 August 2016), (https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20160815_ad-resurgendum-cum-christo_en.html).

illuminates the Christian meaning of death, burial is above all the most fitting way to express faith and hope in the resurrection of the body” (no. 3). While noting that the Church prefers burial because it “shows a greater esteem towards the deceased,” the Congregation explains that there is nothing about the practice of cremation in itself that conflicts with Church teaching about the immortality of the soul or the resurrection of the body (no. 4). Of particular importance, however, is the manner in which the cremated remains, i.e., the ashes, are treated.

6. The basic requirement for showing proper respect to the ashes of the deceased is that they “be laid to rest in a sacred place” (no. 5).⁷ They may not be kept permanently at home⁸ or divided among various family members (no. 6). They may not be scattered “in the air, on land, at sea or in some other way” (no. 7). They may not be carried around encased in jewelry or other mementos (no. 7). They must be put in a sacred place, usually a cemetery, though it could possibly be a church or some other area that has been “set aside for this purpose, and so dedicated by the competent ecclesial authority” (no. 5).⁹ Such a placement shows our respect for the last remains of the deceased and manifests our Christian hope in the resurrection of the body.

7. Part of the respect that we owe to the dead is to preserve their memory in the Church and to pray for them. The Congregation explains that from the very beginning of the Church

Christians have desired that the faithful departed become the objects of the Christian community’s prayers and remembrance. Their tombs have become places of prayer, remembrance and reflection. The faithful departed remain part of the Church who believes “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.” (no. 5)

⁷ The *Order of Christian Funerals* also envisages the possibility of burial at sea (no. 393).

⁸ The Congregation does envisage some possible exceptions, but these would be truly extraordinary, requiring consultation at a very high level: “Only in grave and exceptional cases dependent on cultural conditions of a localized nature, may the Ordinary, in agreement with the Episcopal Conference or the Synod of Bishops of the Oriental Churches, concede permission for the conservation of the ashes of the departed in a domestic residence” (no. 6).

⁹ It is not required that the cemetery be a Catholic cemetery, but the place in the non-Catholic cemetery where the last remains are to rest must be “properly blessed” (see *Code of Canon Law*, can. 1240 §1 and §2).

The relationship between the living and the dead is not a purely private matter, but rather involves the entire Christian community (no. 3). Reserving the ashes in a sacred place ensures that those who have died will not be deprived of the prayers and remembrance of their families and of the Christian community as a whole (no. 5). The Church earnestly recommends visits to cemeteries to pray for the dead, which is one of the spiritual works of mercy.¹⁰

ALKALINE HYDROLYSIS AND HUMAN COMPOSTING

8. The guidance offered by the Congregation regarding burial and cremation reflects the Church's overarching concern that due respect be shown to the bodily remains of the deceased in a way that gives visible witness to our faith and hope in the resurrection of the body. Unfortunately, the two most prominent newer methods for disposition of bodily remains that are proposed as alternatives to burial and cremation, alkaline hydrolysis and human composting, fail to meet this criterion.

9. Not unlike cremation, both techniques work by dramatically accelerating the process of decomposition of the human body. In alkaline hydrolysis, the body is placed in a metal tank containing about 100 gallons of a chemical mixture of water and alkali and then subjected to both high temperature and high pressure in order to speed decomposition. In a matter of hours, the body is dissolved, except for some bone material. In human composting, the body is laid in a metal bin and surrounded by plant material (such as alfalfa, wood chips, straw, etc.) that fosters the growth of microbes and bacteria to break down the body. Heat and oxygen are added to accelerate the decomposition process. After about a month the body is entirely decomposed into soil.

¹⁰ The Church even offers a plenary indulgence for those who visit a cemetery and pray for the departed between November 1 and November 8 each year and a partial indulgence for those who do this during the rest of the year; see *Manual of Indulgences*, Grant no. 29.

10. The major difference between these newer practices and cremation is found in what is left over at the conclusion of the process. After the cremation process, all the human remains are gathered together and reserved for disposition. The bone fragments, reduced to powder, can be placed in an urn and interred in a sacred place. After the alkaline hydrolysis process, there are also remnants of the bones that can be pulverized and placed in an urn. That is not all that remains, however. In addition, there are the 100 gallons of brown liquid into which the greater part of the body has been dissolved. This liquid is treated as wastewater and poured down the drain into the sewer system (in certain cases it is treated as fertilizer and spread over a field or forest). This procedure does not show adequate respect for the human body, nor express hope in the resurrection.

11. The end result of the human composting process is also disconcerting, for there is nothing left but compost, nothing that one can point to and identify as remains of the body. The body and the plant material have all decomposed together to yield a single mass of compost. What is left is approximately a cubic yard of compost that one is invited to spread on a lawn or in a garden or in some wilderness location. Like alkaline hydrolysis, human composting is not sufficiently respectful of the human body. In fact, the body is completely disintegrated. There is nothing distinguishably left of the body to be placed in a casket or an urn and laid to rest in a sacred place where Christian faithful can visit for prayer and remembrance.

CONCLUSION

12. Human beings are not pure spirits like the angels. We share in the physicality of the material order. We are both body and soul. God's promise is not that the righteous will leave behind their bodies to attain blessedness, but rather that they will be resurrected in their bodies and share in the glorification of the resurrected Christ. "If the Spirit of the one who raised Jesus from

the dead dwells in you, the one who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also, through his Spirit that dwells in you” (Rom 8:11). We will not attain our ultimate destiny separated from the material order, but in our complete humanity, which includes our bodiliness. We are therefore obliged to respect our bodily existence throughout our lives and to respect the bodies of the deceased when their earthly lives have come to an end. The way that we treat the bodies of our beloved dead must always bear witness to our faith in and our hope for what God has promised us.

We shall not all fall asleep, but we will all be changed, in an instant, in the blink of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed. For that which is corruptible must cloth itself with incorruptibility, and that which is mortal must clothe itself with immortality. (I Cor 15:51-53)

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