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CHRISTIAN DUTY TO BURY THE DEAD  
AND ITS CONTEMPORARY CHALLENGES

INTRODUCTION

Upon receiving a sad notification of the death of a family member or a friend – our brother or sister in Christ – we are also accustomed to learning about the upcoming celebration of that person’s life, which typically consists of the prayerful gathering in the presence of the body, known as the wake or the calling hours. The Funeral Mass with the prayers of commendation is held in the parish church or chapel, followed by the procession to the cemetery for the rite of burial. We are habituated with the sound of the church bells announcing the death of a Christian, the funeral songs, the prayers, the fragrance of the burned incense, and the blessing with the Holy Water.

Living in culturally desegregated communities, we know that our traditions differ from the traditions of our neighbors, Christians of different denominations, the faithful of different religions, or people of different cultures. We may witness that some people mummify the bodies of their departed loved ones; others commit the remains to the waters of the sea or the ocean, and still, others dispose of the cadavers by cremation or sky burial.

Today’s world is a world of cultural interactions that influence every sphere and aspect of our lives. We learn foreign languages, we eat regional foods, and we listen to ethnic music. Sometimes we even adopt the external practices regarding the way we honor our beloved deceased. These practices may come as an innocent enrichment of our traditions, but often enough they violate the integrity of our practice or contradict its meaning.

Depending on what is valued by the people, the choice of posthumous routine for their dead is shaped by practical reason, i.e. the removal of the decaying body from the living space of the community, and sentimental perspective, i.e. loving remembrance of the departed<sup>1</sup> and expression of religious beliefs<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> H. Thompson, *Cremation. The Treatment of the Body After Death*, London: Smith, Elder, & Co. 1884, p. 5.

<sup>2</sup> H. Thompson, *Cremation*. p. 11.

## HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Christian funerary observance is not random; its every part is strictly connected with our recognized anthropology and expresses our religious views. Just as Christianity grew out of Jewish expectations, the Christian way of interment grew out of Jewish practices at the time.

Jewish funerary practice, with minor changes required by civil law in force, was first inspired by the creed of the Israelites, which states that each human person is created by God in his image, and to be seen in the state of decomposition is an offense against the Creator (Deut 21,22–23). It is the responsibility of the whole community of believers to assure that every Jew is properly buried<sup>3</sup>. The posthumous protocol is deeply and solidly entrenched in religious convictions and expresses eschatological hopes and expectations for the resurrection and eternal life. The ceremonial washing of the corpse is not only a hygienic routine, but also a ritual reflecting a belief that death is a new beginning, and just as a newborn child “comes into the world naked” (Eccl 5,14; Job 1,21) and is washed clean and ready for the introduction to the society, so the deceased believer, upon parting from this world, cannot take anything with him or her, not even the grime. The observance of wrapping the corpse in the linen shroud points to the truth, that the wealthy and unfortunate are equal in the eyes of God the Creator<sup>4</sup>. The burial requirement is fulfilled solely if the dead body is laid in the ground. The most proper form is for the body to contact the ground in the accomplishment of Adam’s curse: “By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken; for dust you are and to dust you will return” (Gen 3,19). This obligation relates also to the part of the body removed during one’s lifetime, for example, by amputation. If the person would be uncomfortable knowing that a part of him or her is already “among the dead”, that part can be properly preserved until his or her death and then buried along with the rest of the body<sup>5</sup>. The tradition of viewing the burial as the return to the ground is followed by a rabbinic recommendation to entomb the body in a burial sack and, after decomposition of the flesh, to place remaining bones in the casket or coffin. According to the alternative protocol, the floorboard of the casket or coffin should be pulled out after it is placed in

<sup>3</sup> E. Zohn, *A Strong Obligation*, <http://teamshabbos.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/Mes-Mitzvah-in-Our-Times-002.pdf> [access: 16 I 2020].

<sup>4</sup> R. Eisenberg, *The JPS Guide to Jewish Traditions*, Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society 2004, p. 78–80.

<sup>5</sup> E. Mansour, *The Obligation to Bury the Deceased*, <https://itorah.com/lecture/audio/rabbi-eli-mansour/the-obligation-to-bury-the-deceased/1953/6> [access: 16 I 2020].

the tomb or grave<sup>6</sup>. Biblical tradition also provides an account of the practice of exhumation, transportation, and reburial of human remains. Bones of Patriarch Joseph were transported by Moses from Egypt and reburied at Shechem (Gen 50,25; Ex 13,17–19; Jos 24,32). King David obtained the stolen bodies of his predecessor Saul and his son Jonathan from the original place of burial and reburied them in Zela (2 Sm 21,12–14)<sup>7</sup>.

Jesus Christ was born into a traditional Jewish family. After his passion and death on the Cross, his body was prepared and buried in accordance with religious regulations. His Resurrection is the primary inspiration for the Christian funeral. The writings of the New Testament provide evidence that Jesus' funeral was performed on the day of his death by his friends, Joseph of Arimathaea and Nicodemus, according to the following custom: his body was treated with the blend of myrrh and aloes, wrapped with spices in linen fabric, and placed in a tomb carved in the rock. The tomb had a stone-covered entrance and was located in the garden outside the city limits of Jerusalem. Following the burial, Mary Magdalene and Mary, the mother of Joseph, stayed at the site of interment for a while (Matt 27,57–61; Mark 15,42–47; Luke 23,50–56; John 19,38–42)<sup>8</sup>. It was a typical funeral at that time. In a similar way, the disciples of John the Baptist buried his corpse after his execution at the order of King Herod (Matt 14,3–12; Mark 6,17–29). Furthermore, the burial place of the widow's son from the town of Nain (Luke 7,11–17), and the one of Lazarus (John 11,1–44) were situated outside the residential area. Additionally, the body of Lazarus was enfolded and bound in fabric, and located in a walk-in grave. In a matching manner, the family and friends of the synagogue official, Jairus, arranged a mourning gathering after the death of his daughter (Matt 9,18–26; Mark 5,21–43; Luke 8,40–56).

#### CURRENT OBSERVANCES

Following the tradition outlined above, the Church celebrates the death of her children by prayer, remembrance, and proper disposal of the earthly remains. Liturgy of the Catholic Church shares the holistic approach to human existence,

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<sup>6</sup> J. Eisenstein, *Coffin*, in: I. Singer, C. Adler (ed.), *The Jewish Encyclopedia. A Descriptive Record of the History, Religion, Literature, and Customs of the Jewish People from the Earliest Times to the Present Day*, vol. 4, New York-London: Funk and Wagnalls Company 1916, p. 142–144.

<sup>7</sup> B. Schmitt, L. Washington (and others), *The Concise A to Z Guide to Finding It in the Bible*, Grand Rapids: Baker Publishing Group 2013, p. 92.

<sup>8</sup> B. McCane, *Roll Back the Stone. Death and Burial in the World of Jesus*, Harrisburg-London-New York: Trinity Press International 2003, p. 30–32.

understanding death as a change in conditions of human life, but not its end<sup>9</sup>. The celebration of this transition begins with the administration of the Anointing of the Sick, the reception of the Holy Eucharist in the form of Viaticum, acknowledged as nourishment for the journey, and prayers of commendation for the dying that express the union with Christ, who in the last hour of his earthly life prayed: "Into your hands, Lord, I commend my spirit" (Luke 23,46). Prayers after one's death include the references to the sacramental life and hope for eternal redemption<sup>10</sup>.

Liturgy of the Eucharist is adorned with evocative symbols. The Paschal candle reminds the faithful of Christ's victory over death. Blessing with the Holy Water calls to mind the sacrament of Baptism and membership in the community of faith. Incense is used as the mark of honor to the body of a Christian which is the temple of the living God. White pall is often placed over the casket as the emblem of baptismal garment<sup>11</sup>.

The committal is the final act of the Church caring for the corpse of a Christian. It is recommended for the committal to be celebrated at the open grave, tomb, columbarium, or at sea. A less favored option is to observe the rite at the cemetery chapel. In entrusting the remains to their resting place, people of God express their faith in the reunion with those who have already died in the hope of the resurrection. Blessing of the burial ground proclaims it to be a mark of promise and expectation<sup>12</sup>.

A Catholic funeral, i.e. the fulfillment of the final corporal work of mercy "to bury the dead", is not an isolated celebration. It is a consequence of "visiting the sick", and leads to praying for the dead<sup>13</sup>.

## CONTEMPORARY PROPENSITIES

In the western world, the most common alternative to the traditional disposal of the human body by means of the burial is currently the custom of cremation.

The global practice of cremation is very old: it dates back to 40,000 years ago. The archaeological discovery of the remains of the Mungo Man in Australia is the oldest known case of human cremation<sup>14</sup>. This mortuary practice was culturally

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<sup>9</sup> RM 78.

<sup>10</sup> CS 212–216.

<sup>11</sup> OF 35–38.

<sup>12</sup> OF 204–209.

<sup>13</sup> CCC 2447.

<sup>14</sup> W. Brooks, C. Mora (and others), *Coal and Ancient Man. Cremation at the Tschudi Burn, Chan Chan, Northern Peru*, in: G. Stracher, A. Prakash, E. Sokol (ed.), *Coal and Peat Fires. A Global Perspective*, vol. 1: *Coal - Geology and Combustion*, Amsterdam-Boston-Heidelberg-London-New York-Oxford-Paris-San Diego-San Francisco-Singapore-Sydney-Tokyo: Elsevier 2011, p. 75.

established in the areas influenced by the idea of reincarnation. Followers of Hinduism believe that cremation and scattering the ashes into the waters of the Ganges River has the power to advance the quality of the next life of the departed person, or even liberates the human being from a never-ending sequence of reincarnations<sup>15</sup>. In a similar way, among Buddhists cremation is the most common posthumous protocol. Buddha was cremated, and according to the legend, his crematory pyre was spontaneously combusted<sup>16</sup>.

For many centuries, the custom of the burial of the body was at first the preferable, and eventually, the only legal option in western civilization, influenced by Judaism and Christianity. Cremation gradually reoccurred in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries with the cultural changes brought by the Age of Enlightenment<sup>17</sup>. It was first reintroduced merely as an accelerated process of decomposition, in which the result that in the grave is obtained over the period of many years is achieved in only a few hours. Cremation was the answer to the concerns regarding health, hygiene, and the safety of the growing population that lived in densely inhabited areas, and consequently, needed more spacious graveyards. More decomposing human bodies meant a bigger environmental impact, especially on the pollution of water reservoirs. The practice of cremation was also viewed as a reliable way to prevent extreme horror of premature interment<sup>18</sup>. Advocates of the alternative to the routine observances of burying the dead claim that cemeteries use too much space that could be used for living or agricultural purposes. The proposed solution involves the idea of graveyards for the human ashes as a park-like area, where open space, the beauty of nature, masterpieces of art, and inspiration from history can be found and enjoyed<sup>19</sup>. The cultural importance of the burial place as a place of remembrance and inspiration is further supported by the fact that remains of the most notorious criminals, like Nazi leaders (Adolph Hitler<sup>20</sup>, Heinrich Himmler<sup>21</sup>, and Adolf Eichmann<sup>22</sup>), were scattered over the uninhabited areas or buried at undisclosed locations out of concern that the graves may become the place of a re-birth of the disgraceful ideology and the motivation for new followers. In the very

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<sup>15</sup> N. McClelland, *Encyclopedia of Reincarnation and Karma*, Jefferson-London: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers 2010, p. 97.

<sup>16</sup> D. Davies, E. Kent, H. Keizer, *Introduction*, in: D. Davies, L. Mates (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Cremation*, London-New York: Routledge, Tylor & Francis Group 2016, p. XIX.

<sup>17</sup> D. Davies, E. Kent, H. Keizer, *Introduction*, p. XVIII.

<sup>18</sup> H. Thompson, *Cremation*, p. 6–11.

<sup>19</sup> W. Robinson, *Cremation and urn-burial, or The cemeteries of the future*, London-Paris-New York-Melbourne: Cassel & Company, Limited 1889, p. 108–112.

<sup>20</sup> H. Buechner, W. Bernhart, *Hitler's Ashes. Seeds of a New Reich*, Metairie: Thunderbird Press, Inc. 1989, p. 18.

<sup>21</sup> P. Longerich, *Heinrich Himmler*, transl. J. Noakes, L. Sharpe, Oxford-New York: Oxford University Press 2012, p. 3.

<sup>22</sup> P. Bartrop, *A Biographical Encyclopedia of Contemporary Genocide. Portraits of Evil and Good*, Santa Barbara-Denver-Oxford: ABC-CLIO, LLC 2012, p. 354.

same way, war criminals deprived their victims, such as Major Henryk “Hubal” Dobrzański, of the official resting place as it could serve as the site of encouragement for their compatriots<sup>23</sup>.

Highly esteemed self-sufficiency, and the importance of not being a burden to the loved ones, typically manifested in the decisions made at the end of one’s life, may also contribute to the choice of a form of body disposal after one’s death<sup>24</sup>. This disposition of mind may regard both the ever-growing expenses and the maintenance of the burial place. The wish to be cremated – an option which is simpler, more convenient, and cost-effective – is often seen as an act of kindness towards the family who is typically in charge of the funeral arrangements.

Considering different scenarios for the celebration of life and funerary observance often leads to a confrontation of different personal needs, namely belonging and distinction<sup>25</sup>. Planning and communicating the will regarding one’s own interment may be influenced by the need to cherish tradition and confirm the alliance with ancestors, co-citizens, and fellow believers. It may also give a chance to express personal distinctiveness and need for innovation<sup>26</sup>. Creative culture challenges tradition, but it also helps to recognize the forgotten meaning of said tradition, and so refines it<sup>27</sup>. A remarkable change of preferences in a funerary praxis can be seen as an indication of misunderstanding cultural orders. An effort to comprehend cultural conventions may be more constructive and beneficial than the enthusiasm associated with trying something new.

Today, the observance of cremation is becoming more and more popular. It is seen as a more fashionable form of posthumous protocol. In addition to social and economic reasons, it is promoted as suitable for modern and fast-living culture. It gives the opportunity for almost endless personalization of honoring the departed loved ones. It allows for scattering the ashes in the air or the waters at a favorite location, burying the remains in a private ceremony in the backyard, keeping them at home, integrating them into the memorial jewelry or fireworks,

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<sup>23</sup> M. Leuchter, *Preface*, in: A. Ziolkowska-Boehm, *Polish Hero Roman Rodziewicz. Fate of a Hubal Soldier in Auschwitz, Buchenwald, and Postwar England*, transl. C. Zakrzewski, Lanham-Boulder-New York-Toronto-Plymouth: Lexington Books 2013, p. XV.

<sup>24</sup> D. Westen, *Psychology: Mind, Brain, & Culture*, Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons Inc. 2019, p. 356.

<sup>25</sup> M. Ghoshal, P. Boatwriter, M. Malika, *Curvature From All Angles. Integrative Review and Implications for Product Review*, in: R. Batra, C. Seifert, D. Brei (ed.), *The Psychology of Design. Creating Consumer Appeal*, New York-London: Routledge 2016, p. 95.

<sup>26</sup> B. Miller, S. Berger, *A Beginner’s Guide to the End. Practical Advice for Living Life and Facing Death*, New York-London-Toronto-Sydney-New Delhi: Simon & Schuster 2019, p. 353.

<sup>27</sup> R. Ginsberg, *Creativity and Culture*, in: M. Mitias (ed.), *Creativity in Art, Religion, and Culture*, Amsterdam: Rodopi B. V. 1985, p. 98.

sending them into the space<sup>28</sup>, or even processing into a vinyl record<sup>29</sup>. One of the recent trends includes the infusion of human ashes into the paint for portraits<sup>30</sup>, or ink for memorial tattoos<sup>31</sup>.

Environmental researchers assess the menace of cemeteries to the groundwater<sup>32</sup>, and seem to hold off alarming conclusions. The practice of cremation is frequently presented and promoted as a simple, clean, harmless, and economic way of disposing of the human body. The opinions above overlook the environmental distress associated with the practice of cremation. It is estimated that each cremation lasts up to three hours in the temperature of over 850 °C, which results in the emission of approximately 250 kg of carbon dioxide, a significant amount of mercury, and other deadly toxins to the atmosphere<sup>33</sup>. This equals greenhouse gas emissions of an average passenger vehicle covering the distance of 1000 km<sup>34</sup>, and should be taken into consideration in the process of deciding on the form of a funeral.

Damaging to the natural world outcomes of cremation are especially noticeable in highly populated India, where usage of very inefficient outdoor funeral pyres and scattering ashes into the rivers belong to a venerable tradition<sup>35</sup>.

Modern awareness of the environmental impact of the funerals brings about the ideas of resomation and promession<sup>36</sup>. Resomation (also referred to as green cremation, bio-cremation, water resolution, water reduction, water cremation, cryomation, or aquamation) is a process of disposing of human cadavers by means of the chemical process known as alkaline hydrolysis<sup>37</sup>. The procedure liquefies the dead body and leaves an insignificant amount of fluid from the flesh and about three kilograms of the powder from the bones. The liquid part is typically drained into wastewater or used as a fertilizer<sup>38</sup>, and the powder is used by loved

<sup>28</sup> A. Noble, *Cremation. A Brief History*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4CG1x775IOs> [access: 12 III 2020].

<sup>29</sup> A. Riechers, *Strange Eternity. Virtual Memorials, Grief, and Entertainment*, in: C. Staudt, J. Ellens (ed.), *Our Changing Journey to the End. Reshaping Death, Dying, and Grief in America*, vol. 1, *New Paths of Engagement*, Santa Barbara-Denver-Oxford: ABC-CLIO 2013, p. 211.

<sup>30</sup> C. Quigley, *The Corpse. A History*, Jefferson-London: McFarland & Company Inc., Publishers 2015, p. 100.

<sup>31</sup> D. Davidson, *Introducing "The Tattoo Project"*, D. Davidson (ed.), *The Tattoo Project. Commemorative Tattoos, Visual Culture, and the Digital Archive*, Toronto: Canadian Scholars 2016, p. 1–17.

<sup>32</sup> A. Hart, S. Casper, *Potential groundwater pollutants from cemeteries*, Bristol: Environment Agency 2004, p. 17–29.

<sup>33</sup> D. Sloane, *Is the Cemetery Dead?*, Chicago-London: University of Chicago Press 2018, p. 55–57.

<sup>34</sup> F. Spellman, *Handbook of Environmental Engineering*, Boca Raton: CRC Press 2015, p. 44.

<sup>35</sup> B. Little, *The environmental toll of cremating the dead*, <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/science/2019/11/is-cremation-environmentally-friendly-heres-the-science/> [access: 19 II 2020].

<sup>36</sup> D. Sloane, *Is the Cemetery Dead?*, p. 71–73.

<sup>37</sup> K. Mariaca-Sullivan, *When a Loved One Dies. The Complete Guide to Preparing A Dignified and Meaningful Goodbye*, Amherst: Madaket Lane Publishers 2011, p. 141–145.

<sup>38</sup> A. Schmidt, *Cremation, Embalment, or Neither? A Biblical/Christian Evaluation*, Bloomington: WestBow Press 2015, p. 65–68.

ones like the ashes after standard cremation<sup>39</sup>. Promession (or composting) is a procedure of converting the human body into the form of eco-friendly compost. The process includes two stages of the thermal procedure: freezing the body to the temperature of -18 °C, and then treating it with liquid nitrogen (between -210 °C and -196 °C). Low temperature makes the cadaver easy to break and turn into powder. The procedure continues with drying and cleansing the matter of non-recyclable artificial body parts<sup>40</sup>. The remaining mass is placed in a recyclable container, returned to the family, and buried. Within a year, the spoilage bacteria turn the container along with the enclosed half-product of promession into an enriching surroundings fertilizer. The family may plant over the place of burial a remembrance tree, and so give the departed loved one opportunity to continue in the biological life cycle<sup>41</sup>.

#### CATHOLIC ANSWER

In 1963, encouraged by Pope Paul VI, the Holy Office authorized cremation as a form of funeral acceptable for the Catholics. The practice which was once commonly perceived as motivated by hostile denial of the teaching of the Church became a tolerable option for the reasons of well-being and economic necessity, but only on the condition that the choice would not deprecate the Catholic religion and its principals<sup>42</sup>.

Ecological disquietude over the long-established burial customs calls for a response. It is worth noticing that Pope Francis makes environmental concerns one of the most important themes of his teaching, and identifies the release of carbon dioxide, and other poisonous substances, as one of the gravest problems: “There is an urgent need to develop policies so that, in the next few years, the emission of carbon dioxide and other highly polluting gases can be drastically reduced, for example, substituting for fossil fuels and developing sources of renewable energy<sup>43</sup>.” Pope Francis anticipates stating the habits of contaminating and devastating the natural environment a moral transgression: “We must introduce – we are thinking about it – in the Catechism of the Catholic Church the sin against ecology, the

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<sup>39</sup> B. Mathijssen, C. Venhofs, *Funerary Practices in the Netherlands*, Bingley: Emerald Publishing Limited 2019, p. 35–36.

<sup>40</sup> A. Schmidt, *Cremation, Embalment, or Neither?*, p. 69–70.

<sup>41</sup> K. Mariaca-Sullivan, *When a Loved One Dies*, p. 146–149.

<sup>42</sup> PC 1–5.

<sup>43</sup> LS 26.



ecological sin against the common home, because it is a duty<sup>44</sup>.” Christian people should approach the variety of options for the funerary observances from the environmental point of view, and therefore as an ethical choice. The ecological choice for Catholics may include giving up the treatment of the body with preservatives, and interment or cremation in an ecological coffin and the selection of non-toxic clothing materials<sup>45</sup>. Environmental harm can be further reduced by removal of dental fillings<sup>46</sup>, and the same can be done with prosthetics and body implants. This contemporary trend to decrease the negative impact on the environment at all costs should be reflected upon in the light of Pope Francis’ appeal for integral environmentalism<sup>47</sup>.

In addition to cultural and spiritual importance, the place of burial provides religious people with the proper place for yet another act of mercy: “prayer for the deceased”, and inclines the minds of the faithful to the specific article of the creed, i.e. to “the communion of saints”<sup>48</sup>.

Organ donation does not violate the requirement to keep all the remains together in a proper burial. Autopsy and donation of the body to the medical research, to better understand illnesses and injuries follow the standards of Catholic morality<sup>49</sup>. After the study is concluded, the body or its remains should be properly buried<sup>50</sup>.

Obligation to bury the deceased faithful is not contravened by the practice of preserving the earthly remains of the saints in the form of relics for the acts of veneration by the Church. Both the burial of the dead and the cult of the saints are focused on the common good of the people of God. Having relics of saints publicly venerated is substantially different from keeping the remains of the loved ones in private, i.e. as a sentimental souvenir.<sup>51</sup> The long-standing tradition of commemorating the saints finds its reason in the conviction that the saints are alive and

<sup>44</sup> Pope Francis, *Address of His Holiness Pope Francis to Participants at the World Congress of the International Association of Penal Law, Sala Regia, Friday, 15 November 2019*, [http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2019/november/documents/papa-francesco\\_20191115\\_diritto-penale.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2019/november/documents/papa-francesco_20191115_diritto-penale.html) [access: 16 I 2020].

<sup>45</sup> W. Reville, *Which to choose, burial or cremation?*, <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/science/which-to-choose-burial-or-cremation-1.3355960> [access: 20 II 2020].

<sup>46</sup> K. Lasnoski, *Are Cremation and Alkaline Hydrolysis Morally Distinct?*, *National Catholic Bioethics Quarterly* 16.2 (Summer 2016), p. 238.

<sup>47</sup> QA 41.

<sup>48</sup> CCC 946–947.

<sup>49</sup> CCC 2301.

<sup>50</sup> T. Pacholczyk, *Can I Donate My Body to Science?*, [https://www.ncbcenter.org/files/2815/0006/0577/MSOB144\\_Can\\_I\\_Donate\\_My\\_Body\\_to\\_Science.pdf](https://www.ncbcenter.org/files/2815/0006/0577/MSOB144_Can_I_Donate_My_Body_to_Science.pdf) [access: 13 II 2020].

<sup>51</sup> J. Hastings, *Keeping a body together vs. relics*, <https://www.stbensduluth.org/blog/fr-joel-hastings/keeping-a-body-together-vs-relics> [access: 13 II 2020].

participate in the glory of Christ's Resurrection, and the right to have their remains held in the highest regard takes priority over the duty of burial<sup>52</sup>.

In reaction to the growing popularity of the alternatives to the traditional burial of the human body, in 2016 the Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith published the Instruction *Ad resurgendum cum Christo*. The instruction explains the doctrinal and pastoral grounds for which burial in the cemetery or the other sacred place remains the preferable form of funeral. It also provides the norms for the safeguarding of human ashes. Christian burial is the perfect way of expressing eschatological expectations. The Church does not prohibit cremation on the hygienic, financial, and social grounds, except for when it is motivated by reasons opposed to the Catholic faith and is a manifestation of, unable to coexist with it, philosophical and religious views. The ashes of the cremated Christians ought to be put to rest with the respect shown to the human body<sup>53</sup> and in the place that is "properly blessed"<sup>54</sup>.

The practice of cremation has existed in other cultures and religions for centuries and the process of introduction into western civilization has brought along some values and meanings. New achievements concerning resomation and promession of the human body are crafted to match the order of today's world and its people and respond to their values. The minimal ecological impact and usefulness seem to dominate among the currently valued principles. Catholic reflection on ethical aspects of resomation notices that in the objective evaluation it does not carry the signs of inherent evil, as the fluid byproduct of the process is not the human body, and the solid remains can be placed in the vessel and reposed in a proper way, similarly to the product of cremation. As far as the common good is concerned, because of its minimal ecological impact, while compared to traditional burial and cremation, resomation seems to be somewhat beneficial. Subjectively, the idea that the particular usage of human remains extends and continues our work on earth is contradictory to the Christian faith in the resurrection of the body. Chemical processing of the human corpse in highly industrial surroundings is not a reverent mode of farewell, and so it appears that there are no sufficient grounds for the authorities of the Catholic Church to accept it<sup>55</sup>.

The process of promession seems to be the opposite of cremation, as its main factor is a thermal work of freezing instead of incineration. An effort to make the procedure consistent with Christian beliefs fails as the main purpose of promession is to become fertilizer, and so to have a new life as a part of, for example, a memorial tree, and not to hope for resurrection<sup>56</sup>. When the traditional burial is challenged

<sup>52</sup> A. Regi, *When did the veneration of relics begin?*, <https://www.catholicfocus.in/when-did-the-veneration-of-relics-begin/> [access: 13 II 2020].

<sup>53</sup> RC 1–8.

<sup>54</sup> CIC, can. 1240.

<sup>55</sup> K. Lasnoski, *Are Cremation and Alkaline Hydrolysis Morally Distinct?*, p. 233–242.

<sup>56</sup> K. Lasnoski, *Are Cremation and Alkaline Hydrolysis Morally Distinct?*, p. 240.

as insensitive to the needs of the environment, outdated, and inconvenient, Christians may find inspiration for this work of faith and kindness in the example of the courage of biblical Tobit, who buried the dead Israelites against the ban issued by civil authority (Tob 1,17–2,4)<sup>57</sup>.

#### FINAL REMARK

Humans are arguably the only creatures that dispose of the bodies of their deceased. Some studies suggest that elephants demonstrate care for their dead and that dogs seem to be sad when their masters die<sup>58</sup>. Other research supports the theory of death rituals among the dolphins, the chimpanzees, and other hominines<sup>59</sup>. In the world of insects, ants remove the dead from their nests<sup>60</sup>. However, it is beyond doubt that no other being cares for the dead with as much consideration as the humans<sup>61</sup>. The disposal of the human body is one of the most long-lasting elements of human culture. The formal procedure of disposing of the human corpse is not merely a hygienic practice. It expresses cultural circumstances and religious beliefs. Today's world offers environmental awareness and technological possibilities to carry out different mortuary practices and provides various means to commemorate the dead. To be buried in the sacred ground, under the cross, and with a rosary in one's hands remains the best way to communicate that here rests in peace the body of a person who believed in Jesus Christ and died hoping for the resurrection.

#### LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS:

- AAS – Acta Apostolicae Sedis  
CCC – Catechism of the Catholic Church  
CIC – Code of Canon Law

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<sup>57</sup> Pope Francis, *The Works of Mercy*, Maryknoll: Orbis Books 2017, p. 109–110.

<sup>58</sup> T. Laqueur, *The Work of the Dead. A Cultural History of Mortal Remains*, Princeton: Princeton University Press <sup>2</sup>2018, p. 91.

<sup>59</sup> J. Goldman, *Death rituals in the animal kingdom*, <https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20120919-respect-the-dead> [access: 28 II 2020].

<sup>60</sup> C. Allen, M. Hauser, *Concept Attribution in Nonhuman Animals. Theoretical and Methodological Problems in Ascribing Complex Mental Processes*, in: M. Bekoff, D. Jamieson (ed.), *Readings in Animal Cognition*, London-Cambridge: The MIT Press <sup>2</sup>1999, p. 54.

<sup>61</sup> L. Aiken, *Dying, Death, and Bereavement*, Mahwah: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Publishers 2001, p. 129.

- CS – Pastoral Care of the Sick  
QA – Post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation “Querida Amazonia”  
LS – Encyclical Letter “Laudato si”  
OF – Order of Christian Funeral  
PC – Instruction “Piam et constantem”  
RC – Instruction “Ad resurgendum cum Christo”  
RM – The Roman Missal

## CHRZEŚCJAŃSKI OBOWIĄZEK GRZEBANIA ZMARŁYCH I JEGO WSPÓŁCZESNE WYZWANIA

### Streszczenie

Zwyczaj grzebania zmarłych jest tradycją najściślej zakorzenioną w chrześcijańskiej antropologii i najlepiej ją wyrażającą. Wiąże się on z objawioną w Biblii konsekwencją grzechu pierworodnego. Stanowi wyraz oczekiwania na zmartwychwstanie i akt naśladowania Chrystusa, który został złożony w grobie. W nauczaniu katolickim pochówek jest uczynkiem miłosierdzia względem ciała, świadectwem troski o zmarłego i jego bliskich. Ze względów zdrowotnych, gospodarczych lub społecznych Kościół dopuszcza zyskującą na popularności zwyczaj kremacji. Szczątki ludzkie, również w formie popiołu, zawsze powinny być złożone w grobie lub umieszczone w kolumbarium. Formą nieakceptowaną przez Kościół są praktyki tzw. resomacji lub kompostowania ciał zmarłych. Takie alternatywne formy traktowania martwego ciała ludzkiego lub jego szczątków, choć zachęcają swoją estetyką i swoistym przesłaniem, są nie tylko obce chrześcijańskim zwyczajom, ale sprzeczne z chrześcijańską nauką o pochodzeniu, naturze i przeznaczeniu człowieka.

**Słowa kluczowe:** rytuał pośmiertny, pochówek, pogrzeb, kremacja, resomacja, kompostowanie ludzkiego ciała, ekologia.

## CHRISTIAN DUTY TO BURY THE DEAD AND ITS CONTEMPORARY CHALLENGES

### Summary

The custom of burying the dead is not merely commonly accepted by the Christian-ity way of disposal of the human body after death. It is most deeply rooted and perfectly expressing Christian anthropology, revealed in the Holy Scriptures as a consequence of original sin, a sign of hope in the resurrection, and imitation of Christ, who was buried in the tomb. In the Catholic view, the burial is a corporal work of mercy, an act of care for the dead and their loved ones. Gaining popularity the practice of cremation is accepted by the Church for the sake of hygiene, economy, or community. Human remains, also in the form of ashes, always must be buried or placed in the columbarium. The Church does not allow human body disposal by resomation or promession. Alternative forms of memorializing

the deceased, though attractive esthetically and sentimentally, are not only outlandish in Christian culture, but also contrary to the Christian teaching on origins, nature, and destination of the human person.

**Keywords:** mortuary practice, burial, funeral, cremation, resomation, promession, ecology.

## DIE CHRISTLICHE PFLICHT, DIE TOTEN ZU BEGRABEN UND IHRE HEUTIGEN HERAUSFORDERUNGEN

### Zusammenfassung

Der Brauch, die Toten zu begraben, ist eine Tradition, die am tiefsten in der christlichen Anthropologie verwurzelt ist und sie am besten zum Ausdruck bringt. Er ist mit der biblischen Lehre über die Folgen der Erbsünde verbunden, ist ein Ausdruck der Erwartung auf die Auferstehung und ein Akt der Nachfolge Christi, der ins Grab gelegt wurde. In der katholischen Lehre ist die Bestattung ein Werk der Barmherzigkeit gegenüber dem Leichnam eines Verstorbenen, aber auch ein Akt der Fürsorge für den Verstorbenen und seine Angehörigen. Der zunehmende Wunsch nach einer Feuerbestattung wird von der Kirche zwischenzeitlich aus gesundheitlichen, wirtschaftlichen oder sozialen Gründen akzeptiert – es sei denn, die Feuerbestattung wird aus Gründen gewählt, die der christlichen Glaubenslehre widersprechen und den Glauben an die Auferstehung ausdrücklich leugnen. Menschliche Überreste, auch in Form von Asche, sollten immer in ein Grab oder in ein Kolumbarium gelegt werden. Eine von der Kirche nicht akzeptierte Form ist die Praxis der sog. Resomation und Kompostierung der Körper der Verstorbenen. Solche alternativen Formen der Behandlung vom toten menschlichen Körper bzw. seiner Überreste, obwohl sie durch ihre Ästhetik und Botschaft interessant zu sein scheinen, sind nicht nur den christlichen Bräuchen fremd, sondern stehen auch im Widerspruch zur christlichen Lehre über den Ursprung, die Natur und das Schicksal des Menschen.

**Schlüsselwörter:** posthume Rituale, Bestattung, Einäscherung, Resomation, Kompostierung des menschlichen Körpers, Ökologie.

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