

THE RICH TRADITION OF CATHOLIC BURIAL

WITH A FOCUS ON CREMATION

by Reverend James Notebaart



Reverend Notebaart celebrated Mass during the Smaller Cemetery Seminar in Minneapolis this year.

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THE CULTURAL SETTING OF THE EARLY CHURCH

When the Christian community began to emerge from their Jewish roots after 98 AD and the Babylonian Council of Jamnia (Javne), the Christians sought protected status as a fraternal organization. The Roman government allowed such fraternities and gave them an exemption from prosecution and persecution. But at the same time there were rumblings about this new culture developing within the Roman world.

We find two camps: those who were part of the Christian community and those who looked upon Christians with suspicion, a cult that needed to be suppressed. The rumblings of this discord were brought to the Roman Senate as early as 35 AD when this new culture was described as “strange and unlawful.” Within a short time Christians were labeled as “deadly”

by Tacitus, and Pliny called them “depraved and unbridled.” Soon other slurs were spread calling Christians “new and malicious,” “dark creatures hating the light,” “disloyal to the government,” “atheists,” “cannibals and baby-eaters.”

But this is not how the Christians saw themselves. By 150 AD a series of writings developed trying to change the growing public image.

The Apologists, the ancient equivalent of spin doctors, addressed the labels. They said,

We live with you. We dress like you.
We shop where you shop.
We speak the same languages.
We obey the laws of the state.
We pay homage to the Emperor but do not adore him.
We care for the poor.

When a slave or beggar is in need of food, we fast and give them what we prepare for ourselves.
We are good citizens.

This was the public face of the Christian community. But we know from the scriptures that there was more than good citizenship here. Christians in the *Book of Acts* describe themselves as living in common and sharing all things together. They gathered, listened to the Apostolic writings, prayed for the needs of the world, broke bread and

ate together. They took up collections for those in need.

This is how the Christians saw themselves, a viable community of compassion. But there is yet another layer that can be added. Christians viewed their world to include those who had died.

THEOLOGICAL TRADITION *The Earliest History*

SECOND TO FOURTH CENTURIES

The relationship between the living and the dead in the ancient Church was considered part of the Christian economy. “Economy” comes from the Greek word “oikos” or “household,” making the dead part of the household. The close relationship between the two can be seen in the title “saints,” a term used by the Apostolic Church (ca. 100 AD) for both the living and the dead. It was a world of mutual love. The dead received the love, care and prayers of the community. The living asked the dead to help them.

You may remember the old composition of the Church: the Church militant (*the living*), the Church suffering (*those being purified*) and the Church triumphant (*those with God*). This was the composition of the Christian household, a household fortified by the belief that once they were baptized into Jesus’ death, they belonged to Christ. Nothing could separate them from the love of God. It was as simple as that.

Belonging to Christ was beyond social status, gender or rank in the Church, beyond life and death itself. All were one. We see this in the most popular image of Christ during this period, the Good Shepherd. There was only one flock and one shepherd, and the Shepherd knew his sheep. The early Christians were confident that what would become of them belonged to God's will.

Belonging to Christ gave hope because unlike the Roman society, no one was condemned by fate. The Roman social model of existence beyond death was a bleak place; the nether world, distant, dark and a vast gap from the community of the living. It was a place of sadness, separation and wandering, and people were destined to that path. For Christians, death wasn't a ghostly existence of specters coming back to haunt the living as in the Roman model, but a relationship of care which extended to both sides of death.

Death was a transformation.

THE PLACE OF CEMETERIES

It was in the context of a cohesive community of Christians who cared for their dead, and a world which was becoming increasingly hostile, that we find the very first recorded purchase of property by the Roman Church (ca. 217 AD). It was a cemetery along the Via Appia. This road, already 400 years old, was the primary link to the rest of Europe and the East. It was the place of Roman superiority where dissidents like Sparticus and his 6,000 followers were executed. It was the point of convergence between the chaos outside where martyrs were made and the faith within.

Bishop Zephyrinus invited Callistus, a deacon, to find a "dormitory" (*a place of sleeping*) where the faithful dead might rest in peace. Initially this cemetery was comprised of the underground crypts (hypogaeum) of the Lucina and the Caecillii families. That catacomb by the fifth century was twelve miles long, having four levels and 20 meters deep.

There has been a long misconception that the catacombs were secret gathering places for Christians. The opposite is true. They were publicly owned and part of the ongoing life of the faithful fully integrated into society. Although on the edge of the city the catacombs were part of city life nevertheless. An early graffiti describes the catacomb:

"Jerusalem, civitas et ornamentum martyrum dei." Translation: Jerusalem, city and ornament of God's martyrs.

These early Christian cemeteries were a mix of social statuses, with the rich and poor, martyr and bishop buried together. We have records of six bishops from Pontian to Miltiades being buried there from 235 AD to 314 AD. There were also non-Christian spouses buried among the faithful.

The catacombs contain the richest theology of that early period with imagery which was Christocentric such as the Good Shepherd or Christ at work among the people curing them. The sacramental life was also portrayed which speaks of the transformation of earthly things as signs of our own inner transformation, Baptism and Eucharist.

At the basis for much of the imagery was the conviction that *"There is no permanent city for us here on earth; we are looking for the city which is to come."* Hebrews 13:14. This is a fundamental belief in a theology of eternal life; *escata*, at the end. We find an epitaph of Agrippina on the way to the popes' crypt: *"cuius dies inluxit."* Translation: The day of her death was a day of her entry into light.

As we leave the catacomb there is a carving dedicated to Baccis, a child. This text resonates with us today. The grief of a father, the hope of a family is apparent in the inscription.

"Baccis, sweet soul. In the peace of the Lord. She lived 15 years, 75 days. She died on the Kalends of December. The father to his sweet daughter."

Or, as another description reads, we read a text of hope.

"Sofronia vivas cum tuis."
Translation: Oh Sophronia, may you live with your dear ones.

The catacomb of Callistus was at the conjunction of two worlds, a place of sleeping as people awaited the Resurrection and a place of martyrdom, where even Bishop Zepherinus was to die.

THE DEAD THEMSELVES

The bodies of the Christian dead were treated as temples of the Holy Spirit. Human remains were prepared by the family with dignity and brought to the place of the dead. Even those whose bodies were ravaged by martyrdom, were collected and buried. Saint Peter's burial place is an example of this practice where his bones were placed in a wall.

Initially there was no concern for keeping the remains of the dead, "intact." It didn't make a difference to Christians if the body was dispersed or scattered, although what remained was conserved and buried. The early Christians had a wider understanding of the body and of the Resurrection itself. So for example, it was a common practice to put lime on the bodies in the catacombs to reduce the flesh. This was not inconsistent with belief in the resurrection of the body.

There was also a practice of distributing the bones of martyrs for special suffrage. Those who had relics were thought to have a strong influence over the martyrs and their prayers. Various communities vied with one another for the remains, and major churches always had relics of the martyrs.

Images, like the Phoenix, (first found in Heroditus in the sixth century BC) were used by the Church. The Phoenix was destroyed by fire only to rise from the ashes. It was a metaphor of Christ rising.



Thus, burning the body to ashes was not a denial of the Resurrection nor was the destruction of the body. We find the latter in the imagery of Ignatius, a second century martyr. He described himself as being ground to pieces by the mouths of wild beasts, like grain is ground, to be kneaded into God's bread.

The lack of a concern for the preservation of human remains was even seen in a prohibition from embalming because it was associated with the cult of Osiris, an Egyptian god of the dead, which proposed the complete preservation of the body. At this period there was no need to conserve bodies in the Church's thinking. We see the Church dismiss the Roman social thought that those lost at sea or unburied were disrupted in their final journey. Resurrection was not a mechanical process but a spiritual one.

God reclaims his own.

WHAT DOES THIS SAY ABOUT THE EARLY CHURCH?

Because the early Church had this wider understanding of the relationship between the living and the dead, it forbade those practices that represented contrary beliefs. For example it refused to accept that the dead were ghosts to be avoided and purged from the household of the living.

The Church opposed purification ceremonies often used to scare away ghosts. It spoke against those who felt the dead had no hope but were drawn by fate. It refused to accept that the dead no longer existed and people have no recourse except fundamental grief.

During these first centuries the Church also opposed those practices that created class separation. Cremation would be an example of this. In Rome itself, members of wealthy families had grand spectacles at cremation with mock battles, mimicking the dead, mixed with professional wailers. The poor were taken to a refuse pile outside of the city and thrown on the flames. This mixture of grief, social disparity, and display were repugnant

to the Church. For these reasons the Church initially opposed cremation.

But the Church did keep the Roman structure of funerals including the family preparation and removal to the grave. However, it changed the character of those funerals from despair to hope; from abandonment to inclusion; from classism to equanimity.

Wailing was replaced by singing of these Psalms:

- *God is King in Majesty Enrobed*, Psalm 93
- *When Israel Came Forth From Egypt*, Psalm 114
- *Give Thanks to the Lord for God is Good*, Psalm 118
- *As the Deer Longs for Running Streams*, Psalm 42
- *The Lord is my Shepherd*, Psalm 23
- *Create in Me a New Heart*, Psalm 51

All these were part of the ancient repertoire of burial.

DEVELOPMENTS AT THE TIME OF TERTULLIAN AND AUGUSTINE

The attitude toward cremation took on a new reason for opposition at the time of Tertullian, after 250 AD. During this time the Church began to talk about the composition of the human person as body and soul. Issues about preserving human remains became part of this discussion. When looked at from the perspective of Resurrection, a mechanical rather than spiritual process was adopted. This made the Church reaffirm its earlier prohibition of cremation.

An additional opposition to cremation developed about 400 AD when Saint Augustine proposed the transmission of original sin during conception. This transmission was conjoined to the flesh. It wasn't long before groups like the Cathari, a reform faction within the Church, began to form. They opposed the flesh as the source of evil, advocating that its members slough off the flesh by committing suicide and that their bodies be destroyed in fire.

Because the Church believed in the goodness of both body and soul it opposed not only the Cathari but its support of cremation.

As the Church grew stronger because of government acceptance after 312 AD, the practice of cremation ceased across Europe with the exception of the lands in the north controlled by the Rus and the Vikings. These groups continued cremation until at least 1100 AD.

FUNERAL MASS DEVELOPED IN THE 12TH CENTURY

The Roman form of the early Christian Funeral Rite remained intact from the earliest period through the 12th Century. There was a single element in the funeral. The prayers at the church consisted of a Liturgy of the Word with commendation. The tone of this service was positive, filled with confidence that our relationship with God was the fulfillment of the Baptismal promise. It spoke of the earliest sense of the household of the faith, in the gathering of the saints.

By Saint Francis of Assisi's time, 1182-1226, things began to change. A greater emphasis was placed on the need for purification and absolution. The individual was expected to make a full confession before death, *an apologia*. In fact between 1415 and 1450 books began to appear helping people to die well. They were called "*ars moriendi*."

At this same time the Eucharist began to be celebrated at funerals, with a special focus on prayers for the purification of the dead. We see the tonal change in funerals by the introduction of hymns like the *Dies Irae* attributed to Thomas of Celano a disciple of Saint Francis. It emphasized the powers and torments of hell. Once the Eucharist became part of the funeral, it remained in place through the reforms of the Council of Trent in the 16th Century to this day.

CREMATION REVIVAL IN THE 19TH CENTURY

It wasn't until late in the 19th Century that cremation returned to Europe. It was brought to England by the Anglo Indians who were imitating the Hindu practice. At first it was merely the activities of an eccentric few who held cremation parties on their estates. Although initially forbidden by British law, it was soon promoted for hygienic reasons by people like Henry Thomas, MD. He was Queen Victoria's doctor and founded the first cremation society in 1874.

The first crematory in Europe was built in 1878 in England and the practice was adopted as an accepted form of final disposition. Once the mechanics of cremation became practical, the practice spread to the rest of the continent.

The first U.S. crematory was built in Washington, PA, in 1878. Although cremation was growing, in 1886 the Church again stated its opposition to cremation for Catholics and censured priests for allowing it. The censure continued until the Second World War. It wasn't until 1963 that the Church permitted cremation as long as it was not contrary to Catholic teaching.

Over the entire history of Christian burial, you can see that there was no one burial tradition, nor a single reason to prohibit cremation. At different times the Church had different understandings which it promoted based on its experiences. The Church also valued a variety of practices based on location and culture including entombment, inhumation and immurement. It opposed those things which were contrary to its understanding about the human person.

Over and above these things it added a faith-filled perspective, a lens through which the secular practices were to be understood.

OUR BUSINESS/ OUR MINISTRY

The theological perspective that influences us to this day is one side of the picture. However, it is not the only perspective that we need to consider. We are also engaged in the business of burial.

Remember the time a family would call George, the cemetery sexton, and arrange a burial. They would pay the parish \$100 and get three lots, two for future use. The grave would be dug and entered in the parish records. It was as simple as that. The families might even maintain the grave themselves. But no more.

When we are looking at the business end of our endeavors we find several components. There is the people side and the management side. On the people side we become keenly aware that not only does death not wait, neither do families. We can almost hear the family of the deceased saying, "*It's my grief, deal with it NOW!*"

We find ourselves constantly challenged with more diverse requests such as:

"Mother always liked the family, why can't the cremated remains of her six nieces be buried with her?" *What we hear is a loss of income.*

Or, why can't my dog be buried with me? She was part of the family. *If you have a dog, try to deny the truth in that request.*

Or someone says, "My family would like to dig the grave for our mother." *We hear the word "liability" lurking in the brush.*

Asians come to us with "It is our tradition to eat at the grave on anniversaries and to leave rice wine." *Are we a park now? Maybe we are.*

I had a reburial recently in which a brother's body was being reburied with his mother, who had just died. The woman's daughter started taking off her coat, hat, gloves, shoes, and clothes. She put them in her mother's vault. While everyone was tempted to stop her, no one did, just hoping that the Minnesota winter would inhibit her. She stopped short of her dress, but barely!

We try to respond to these pastoral situations at the same time we are running a business based on principles. This is a fine line to tread. Although some of these situations have actually expanded our current offerings.

The cemetery has moved in its self-understanding from a singular practice to a practice in which people can express a variety of burial customs. In our own long-range plan for Resurrection Cemetery, Mendota Heights, MN, we have reserved a wooded area for the future burial of cremated remains in a more natural setting. This is not "green burial," but offers variety in the same way that cemeteries traditionally distinguished monument and estate lots from sections with foot markers.

At Gethsemane Cemetery, New Hope, MN, we have reserved an area for the Vietnamese community. We are trying to meet various needs. But beyond these variants we have really expanded our scope. Now cemeteries offer retreats, memorial gatherings, grief seminars, newsletters, twenty-four hour access at mausoleums, etc.

The pastoral perspective has expanded our horizons at the same time we are running the business. We do know that the business side of cemeteries has changed. Look at your *Catholic Cemetery* magazine. More than half of the articles in the March 2006 issue were about incorporation and protection from liability created by law suits, and the government's pressure to remove exempt status. Times have changed!

In our work we are challenged to manage our cemeteries in a most efficient way, with the latest methods of record keeping and investment strategies, having the best tools for our work. We want to utilize our staff in the best possible way for the families, on the one side, and the maintenance of our grounds, on the other.

We find ourselves combining administration and crews when there are multiple cemeteries under our umbrella.

Another part of the business picture is to examine what is happening in the wider industry. This creates an even greater challenge, because things are changing there dramatically. We only have to look at the obituaries in our papers to see the trends.

THE CHANGING PRACTICE CHANGING TERMINOLOGY

Terminology is changing. More and more we see the term “memorial” used in obituaries, or a “celebration of life.”

While there is nothing wrong with the terminology, what it shows is the changing role of religion in funerals. We have always believed that funerals are not only for the living but they are for the dead, too. It is more than collecting our memories of the dead or honoring them with stories and photos. We believe as Church that the dead themselves are commended to the mercy and love of God. The Church offers this as its religious faith.

What does it mean for us as we see an evolution of terminology? How will it affect us?

THE DEATHCARE INDUSTRY

We find a pressure, too, in the rapidly changing funeral industry. As SCI and Loewen failed, we found the gap being filled by local funeral homes. These newly developed corporations have purchased multiple funeral homes and even cemeteries left by the national corporations. The family funeral corporation has captured the market. Some have even created their own mausolea and expanded their services to “celebration halls,” open for a variety of public rental. Every funeral home now offers cremation even when it is out-sourced.

POPULAR PRACTICES

In my 35 years of priesthood I have seen many changes each presenting their own challenges. Thirty-five years ago cremations were rare. Although Catholic permission for cremation happened in 1963, it didn't have a

noticeable effect until the last 15-20 years. Now, cremation is becoming a large percentage of the final disposition of the dead.

The pressures families face are found in the economic divergence from traditional burial. However, there is a price families have to pay in emotional terms. That price is often a funeral without the presence of the body, no wake, or procession to the church or sometimes, even burial.

Condensing a funeral into a single memorial service has an impact on the parish as well, because it can easily be left out of the loop. The community of the faithful, where the person gathered to celebrate Eucharist, is not part of the funeral. Thus the community is deprived of its ability to mark the Paschal Mystery, grounded in a parish member's death. This is the loss of a fundamental way of being sacrament in the Church.

The other change, which is a personal aggravation to me, is the growing practice of keeping the remains, or at least a portion of the remains.

In spite of the Church's legislation regarding burial of cremated remains, people are doing what they want with them. The state codes support this as cremation is considered the final disposition of the body.

I remember having a funeral for one individual. The day she died, I went to her bedroom for the Final Rites of Commendation. There on the table were five or six urns representing the whole family. What happened? The family secreted the remains into the casket (against cemetery rules, by the way) and buried the whole family at a nearby cemetery.

Is that our future, when families reach the end of their lineage? Just packing caskets with family members? Or even worse, as my secretary (who spends summers at garage sales) discovered, there was an urn, freshly washed, and made available to the buyer? What happened to the cremated remains is a mystery.

On one side I believe it is the economics of burial bringing these issues to the fore. In addition there is also the need for family members to process death differently than in the past. Is this because of the population's mobility, or is the secularization of our society, the loss of faith or the way families interact with one another? I don't know. But I do know there will be an impact on our practice as cemeterians. This trend will become part of the business of burial in the next century.

THE FUTURE, BLEAK OR BOUNTIFUL?

The key question facing Catholic cemeterians is, how do we continue to offer our Catholic understanding of death, nourish our pastoral instincts, and keep the business going? One thing is sure. People will continue to die. That is the truth. We will always have the pastoral need to be present to the dead and their families. That will not change.

I know my generation, the Baby Boomers, will be studied to death, literally. The Boomers will provide much information for future analysts.

But where will we go? I think cremation will continue to grow based on economics. This will have an impact on cemeteries and their allocation of land. As the number of cremations rise, parishes may begin to open their own cemeteries for cremated remains or create niches in the churches for burial. The process has already begun in places like Florida.

On one hand it makes sense to have the dead of the parish nearby. It is permitted in Canon Law. In fact, burial at the parish cemetery is the preferred form of burial. It is part of the most ancient tradition as well. On the other hand it will have an impact on already established cemeteries.

What would happen if universities and public centers create the possibility of distinguished alumni and benefactors being placed in their walls just like the Kremlin wall houses Stalin, Andropov, Chernyenko and Nikita Khrushchev?

How will we deal with cemeteries that are reaching capacity?

Maintenance of these properties will become an economic burden on budgets. What about deteriorating mausolea, both private and Church-owned?

There may be even greater challenges out there in the potential of economically feasible ways of final disposition. Take for example, the dissolution of the remains in an alkaline bath. It is already practiced as part of animal control.

I know the Church will forbid the alkaline bath just as it did cremation, not out of Resurrection issues, but of the proper dignity with which a human body is to be treated. It may be out there as an option, and whenever options exist, if they win acceptance, they will become normative. That could mean the end of the cemetery. Will it happen? Probably not!

What is our role as cemetarians in the future? We have our identity. We are ministers of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, a ministry of compassion and awareness. To that we can add four short phrases that represent both our past and our future.

We are:

- *Servants of the Church*
- *Custodians of the dead*
- *Keepers of the places of memory and hope*
- *Trusted advocates for families.*

The rest is left to our own skills to read the times and to have confidence that God has given us the insight and skill to be good stewards.

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