

AN ACT OF MERCY AND FAITH:

A Pastoral Note on Christian Burial

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Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

An act of mercy and an act of faith: With these two foundational assertions, Pope Francis summarized a Christian's approach to burial. The context for the Holy Father's remark was his reflections on the corporal works of mercy, which he delivered over the course of the Year of Mercy. "It is my burning desire," he stated while introducing the Jubilee Year, that "the Christian people may reflect on the corporal and spiritual works of mercy. It will be a way to reawaken our conscience, too often grown dull in the face of poverty" (*Misericordiae Vultus*, 15).

Among these works of mercy to which the Holy Father hoped to "reawaken our conscience" is the call to bury the dead. Pastors in the Archdiocese have observed for years now a shift in our societal expectations toward funerals, and have regrettably noted that this has begun to influence even the Catholic faithful. Perhaps swayed by a materialistic and overly practical approach to life, many have begun to see this noble act of mercy as an unnecessary luxury, or even an inconvenience. It was in response to this development, five years ago, that I felt the need to write the pastoral letter, *In Union with Christ's Dying and Rising*, on the importance of Christian funerals. That letter is a fuller and more complete reflection than this message on the beauty, importance and dignity of Christian funerals, and I firmly believe a fresh re-reading of it would be beneficial today.

Since the publication of my letter, however, there have been two important developments in the life of the local Church concerning Christian burial that I desire to share with you here.

The first development is the need to re-envision everything we do in light of our mission to become a band of joyful missionary disciples, called to Unleash the Gospel in our communities. We know that Jesus Christ is risen from the dead, and because of this fact, we believe in eternal life, the Resurrection of the Dead and the communion of saints. The funeral vigil, Eucharist and committal (burial or interment) announce to us, through the readings, homily and prayers, the glorious news that Jesus is alive. This is Pope Francis' insight in calling burial "an act of great faith." From beginning to end, a funeral evangelizes us, sharing the good news that God is near and that even in our sorrow, difficulties and distress, we can have joyful confidence in his providence. On our end, through participating in the funeral liturgies, we proclaim to those who have little or no faith, or who do not practice it, the good news that God is mercy. We proclaim through our actions that we are certain that our loved ones are not memories, but that they are alive, they will arise and live for all eternity. Joyful missionary disciples know that God does not allow his creation to pass away. We witness to who our God is by the way we care for our dead.

The second development is more concrete. In response to the Holy Father's call to build a culture of mercy, our Catholic Funeral and Cemetery Services has begun an initiative called

“Gather Them Home.” The need for such an initiative has slowly developed over the past few decades. It has become fairly common for Catholics to choose, either for themselves or for those they love, to have their bodies cremated upon passing from this life. Although ordinarily the hope of the Church is to be able to celebrate the funeral liturgy with the body present, cremation is permitted by the Church when circumstances justify it. A consequence of this, however, is that it also has become increasingly common for the remains of loved ones to be kept in the home after the funeral liturgy. I know there could be a variety of reasons for this: a desire to be close to the one we are grieving, a lack of financial resources to purchase a suitable burial place, or even an inability to arrange for a committal during the short time that family is in town. The point here is not to critique these reasons, but to offer now the opportunity to reverently place these sacred remains in a sacred place.

This November, in honor of All Souls’ Month, we are encouraging the faithful to bring to three of our Archdiocesan Catholic cemeteries (Holy Sepulchre, Our Lady of Hope, and St. Joseph) the remains of their loved ones who have passed, in order for them to be entrusted to their final resting place. This initiative will begin on November 2, the day we remember All Souls, when there will be special committal services for those who will be taking their rightful places in our Catholic cemeteries. In order to properly prepare for these occasions, Catholic Funeral and Cemetery Services will work ahead of time with anyone who wishes to participate. After November 2, these committal services will continue on the 3rd Friday of each month at both Holy Sepulchre and Our Lady of Hope Cemeteries. More information about this opportunity, including details on how to participate, is available at the Gather Them Home website.

It is the conviction of the Church that the earthly remains of our brothers and sisters in Christ deserve to be properly committed to a sacred place. As you read this, you may think of someone with whom you can share this opportunity, perhaps with gentle encouragement to take advantage of it. Our cemeteries are extensions of our parishes: places for prayer, reflection, hope and remembrance. And from these sacred places, those buried there will rise on the Last Day. God has done great things through our loved ones, and they have merited the dignity of a holy burial in a sacred place.

Please know that my prayers accompany each of you as you consider Christ’s call to undertake this act of mercy on his behalf, as part of our efforts to unleash the Gospel.

May the Holy Spirit ever deepen our conviction that Christ is risen and give us the courage to live in joyful witness that we have risen with him. Entrusting each of you to the intercession of St. Joseph of Arimathea, I remain

Sincerely yours in Christ,

Archbishop Allen H. Vigneron