



A message to the faithful of the archdiocese from Archbishop Michael Jackels

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Alternatives to traditional burial methods

Worldwide, 2 people die every second. In the USA, about 2.5 million die every year. This makes burial practices a significant environmental issue.

It's estimated that more than 130 square miles of land will be needed for the in-ground burials of the people projected to die in the next 20 years. Natural resources are used to produce caskets, the ground is filled with concrete for vaults, and ground water is polluted with embalming waste.

And burial plots are expensive, which is why cremation is the most popular burial practice; the least expensive option available. But a single cremation uses about 30 gallons of fuel, and both the burning and the body itself release pollutants into the air. There are however green options.

The Catholic Church is a leader in the use of green burial: no embalming or vaults, biodegradable burial containers, and no headstone. But it still uses up land.

Another option is called alkaline hydrolysis: *A combination of hot water, lye, air pressure and circulation are used to liquify a corpse in a matter of hours, which can then be safely poured in the ground.* The Iowa legislature is presently considering legalization of this process, already legal in 19 states.

Any support given to alkaline hydrolysis might also be given to the process called recompositing: *The body is placed in a container, covered with wood chips, straw and alfalfa, using heat to kill contagions, and air flow for decomposition. After a month, it results in soil.*

One challenge is the disposition of the liquid or the soil in a reverential manner, same as the proper disposition of cremains. The Church only asks that the body be treated with respect, and be laid to rest in a place blessed by clergy, whether in the earth, water, fire, or air, cemetery or not.

Messaging or branding will also be a challenge. A lot of people react negatively to the alternatives, thinking them offensive, disrespectful, undignified. Catholic bishops in


those states that have legalized recompositing registered as being opposed, using those adjectives just mentioned to explain why.

But, is it more offensive than the process involved in embalming the body, dressing it up like a child's doll, and applying make-up to it? Or is it more offensive than the Church practice of cutting a saint's body into pieces for relics? And isn't traditional burial disrespectful to God's good, green earth?

The Church has stated a preference for ground burial, but isn't opposed to cremation for sanitary, economic, or social reasons (*Ad resurgendum cum Christo*, CDF, 2016). For the same reasons, it can be reasoned that the Church would not, should not be opposed to alkaline hydrolysis or recompositing.

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