

# **Life without End:**

Addressing Death Anxiety through the Virtue of Hope  
and the Ministry of Catholic Cemeteries

by Peter Nobes

A thesis submitted to St. Mark's College in fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of Master of Arts – Theological Studies.

Thesis Supervisor: Father John Horgan

Second Reader: Father Richard Rutherford

Date of Submission: 6 June 2021

## Abstract

Life without End: Addressing Death Anxiety through the Virtue of Hope and the Ministry of Catholic Cemeteries

Peter Nobes

St Mark's College, 2021

This thesis addresses the theological problems that are part of people's anxiety and reluctance to engage in the mysteries of death and everlasting life. Modern Western culture represses the experience of death as part of human experience.

The Catholic virtues of faith and hope are examined as antidotes to the problems. These virtues in conjunction with emphasis on eternal life, Jesus Christ's resurrection, and preparation are reviewed to help Catholics better understand death as a mystery to be lived in Christian hope. The Catholic cemetery ministry is explained as an important ministry integral to the Church's mission not only offering respectful preservation of human remains but providing education and comfort for the distress over the death of loved ones and inevitable approach of each person's own death.

It is claimed that those who address their own mortality and who live in Christian hope face life issues with a greater sense of meaning and less anxiety.

## Acknowledgments

I am very grateful to Father John Horgan for his insight and guidance during the research and writing of the thesis which resulted in the writing of a chapter on the theology of a Catholic cemetery. This theology is integral to the Church's mission as a ministry being seen beyond basic burial services and more as a collaborative partner in the formation of the community.

I also thank the many contributors and reviewers of the content including my sister Cathy Young and my wife Lori Nobes for her support while I was frequently away writing on weekends. I thank colleagues at the Gardens of Gethsemani cemetery who provided feedback along the way on key topic areas, and I thank Father Richard Rutherford for his work as a second reader.

The thesis is a culmination of pursuing a Master Arts degree in Theological Studies which has been a journey covering many years while working full time. It has been a pleasure going to school with Catholic school teachers, permanent diaconate candidates and fellow adult learners. Thank you to St. Mark's College for the engaging journey and for the adult faith formation component of the program. The biggest thank you goes to the Holy Spirit for inspiration to address what is a key problem, with hope that the thesis provides value to Church leaders and members of the community.

## Contents

Abstract .....	i
Acknowledgments .....	ii
Introduction .....	1
Chapter 1 Death provides Meaning to Illuminate Life .....	3
Religious Awareness affects Outlook on Life and Death .....	16
Chapter 2 The Problem of Death Anxiety and Avoidance .....	19
Historical Context on the Care for Human Remains and Outlook on Death .....	28
Chapter 3 Jesus Christ and the Catholic Virtue of Hope Changes Everything .....	46
Jesus Christ Transforms Death for Believers .....	51
Hope in the Time of Sickness and Dying .....	56
Theology of the Catholic Cemeteries Ministry with Sacred Burial .....	67
Connecting the Funeral Rite and Sacred Burial with the Healing Sacraments .....	70
Chapter 4 Experiences at Catholic Cemeteries Vancouver .....	74
Chapter 5 Preparation for Death and Eternal Life is a Virtuous Act to be Encouraged .....	81
Catholic Virtues Support Preparation for End-of-life and Eternal Life .....	82
Preparation Contributes to Meaning and Fulfillment .....	88
Conclusion with Pastoral Care Recommendations .....	90
Afterword .....	94
Bibliography .....	95

## Introduction

This thesis addresses theological problems that are part of people's anxiety and avoidance in considering the mysteries of death and everlasting life. In every age Christ shows us the way to our heavenly home, but modern Western culture historically represses the experience of death and dialogue on its meaning.

The thesis examines the Catholic virtues of faith and hope as antidotes to this problem. It discerns the issues of avoidance and how emphasis on eternal life, Jesus Christ's resurrection and engagement with the mysteries of death and eternal life can assist with these avoidance problems. The thesis explores strategies to inspire engagement through preparation to help Catholics better understand death as a mystery to be lived in Christian hope. As a student completing a Master of Arts Theological Studies degree and as the Director of the Roman Catholic Cemeteries for the Archdiocese of Vancouver, I have come to understand the importance of the cemetery ministry as an integral part of the Church's mission. The ministry is not only a practical service offering respectful preservation of human remains in keeping with religious beliefs, but also a theological reality that affords education and comfort for the distress felt over the death of loved ones and the inevitable approach of one's own death. The ministry is an important part of the Church's mission to transform grief and anxiety through the virtue of hope in Christ's promise of mercy and eternal life. The more the ministry and its work forms an integral part of the Catholic believer's experience through liturgy, family, formative opportunities with preaching and workshops, etc., the better a Catholic can integrate the Church's messages and means of healing.

Fear and anxiety are not necessary for the believer who finds hope and meaning through identification with the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Christ is the source of perfect love; He in turn perfects our ability to love and to be loved, with all our joys and sorrows. Perfect love casts out fear.<sup>1</sup> In Christ, we affirm we are on a journey to something better and called to live fully in God's grace today.

This thesis claims that those who address their own mortality and who live in Christian hope face life issues with a greater sense of meaning and less anxiety. The thesis seeks to authenticate this claim with published research of theologians, thanatologists, and medical professionals. Focusing on modern day North American experiences, this paper examines how death is perceived and is experienced. This thesis will highlight Catholic Church teaching and ritual practices on death and eternal life as they affect attitudes towards death and experience in a Catholic context. It will present a theology of the Catholic cemetery ministry emphasizing individual and personal preparation with advance family decision-making for eternal life and the practical choices that are involved in funeral and burial planning. An argument is made to communicate the funeral rite and sacred burial with the healing sacraments. The final section provides recommendations for pastoral care.

The primary method for interpreting theological, secondary theological, academic and literature sources is textual and critical analyses seeking to contextualize Catholic church teaching in our post-modern culture to support Church leaders to explain Her teaching in a more engaging manner.

---

<sup>1</sup> Holy Bible. The New Revised Standard Version. Catholic Bible Press. Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1993. 1 John 4:18

## Chapter 1 Death provides Meaning to Illuminate Life

The experiences of World War II and the Holocaust are events that significantly impacted the 20<sup>th</sup> century outlook and reflection on death, life and meaning. Viktor E. Frankl wrote *Man's Search for Meaning* after being liberated from Nazi concentration camps of World War II. He endured great tragedy, loss of liberties and lost his family in the camps. As a psychiatrist he wanted to write about meaning. Man's search for meaning is the primary motivation in life and this quest is the key for human flourishing. In the camps, Frankl realized he must live for the future. His desire to write a book kept him alive and living with purpose. He developed logotherapy derived from *logos*, a Greek word denoting meaning. He guides readers to find meaning in glimpses of beauty, nature and art demonstrating humans can choose how to respond to suffering. Frankl states that individuals must actualize the potential meaning in their lives with freedom and responsibility being the two sides of the coin.<sup>2</sup> He also counsels use of moral exhortation to examine the gap between what one is and what one should become, then take responsibility to actualize the potential meaning in one's life. The search for meaning may arouse inner tension reflected in Frankl's quote from Nietzsche "He who has a why to live for can bear almost any how."<sup>3</sup>

Many social and religious commentators affirm that we live in a culture that avoids the topic of death on one hand but on the other hand is hard-wired to explore the meaning of life. We are offered meaning through Jesus, when he says: "I am the way, the

---

<sup>2</sup> Viktor E. Frankl. *Man's Search for Meaning*. Boston: Beacon Press, 2019. 129.

<sup>3</sup> Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning*. 104.

truth, the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” John 14:6. *Catechism* articles 998 to 991 teach:

Christ rose from the dead, lives forever, and causes us to share in his eternal life.

In Jesus Christ we encounter that perfect communion of God and humanity to which all persons are called. Humanity from the beginning has been called to union with God, which is made perfectly visible in the ultimate sacrament, or symbol of God’s presence with us: Jesus Christ. This is eternal life.<sup>4</sup>

In John Paul II’s 1999 encyclical *Fides et Ratio* traditional philosophy is cited relying on a straightforward quote from Aristotle “all humans desire to know.” Those that inquire on the meaning of life and what happens after death can be pleasantly informed if they have faith. John Paul II claims: “Each of us has both the desire and the duty to know the truth of our own destiny. We want to know if death will be the definitive end of our life or if there is something beyond – if it is possible to hope for an afterlife or not.”<sup>5</sup> In life, death is a point of limitation and becomes a focal point and opportunity to choose eternal life: “Death puts an end to human life as the time open to either accepting or rejecting the divine grace manifested in Christ...the final encounter with Christ in his second coming.”<sup>6</sup> In people’s natural curiosity for truth, beauty and the good, there is a yearning for humanity and search for meaning, seeking *Grace* is foundational. Death can shift from being seen as the end to something with deeper meaning.

Faith is a gift of God, a supernatural virtue infused by him. Before this faith can be exercised, man must have the grace of God to move and assist him; he must have the interior helps of the Holy Spirit, who moves the heart and converts it to God, who opens the eyes of the mind and makes it easy for all to accept and believe the truth.<sup>7</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. 2nd ed. Vatican City: Vatican Press, 1997. 998-991.

<sup>5</sup> Pope John Paul II. *Fides et Ratio*. Vatican Press. Rome, 1999. Article 26.

[http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_enc\\_14091998\\_fides-et-ratio.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_14091998_fides-et-ratio.html)

<sup>6</sup> *Catechism*. 1021.

<sup>7</sup> *Catechism*. 154.



Former Catholic Health Association of Canada CEO and author James W. Roche wrote an insightful book called *Facing Death, Discovering Life*. Roche shares experiences from his career in Catholic health services covering human experience of death as well as his awareness that every person's death touched him and helped him with deeper questions about the meaning of life. Roche provides wisdom from those accepting dying and imminent death:

Final acceptance of one's dying often brings a peace with it which the person has never experienced before. The inner turmoil and outer unrest that are common during the dying process give way to a life-giving solitude. This sense of inner peace and harmony can have a profound effect on others, healing severed relationships, bringing together separated family members, and forging stronger family identities. In this way people make their dying a gift for others.<sup>8</sup>

There is grace shared for the dying and from the dying towards the living. Roche provides very valuable connections of death to meaning:

Death is a passage into mystery, and this passage somehow affirms how precious life is. People are always developing, and during the dying process transformations can, and often do, occur. Even as they are dying, most people can complete meaningful tasks and grow in ways that are important to them. Dying can bring a human being to become what he or she was called to become....<sup>9</sup>

Roche wrote the book with three themes in mind – how death pushes us to question the meaning of life; how it opens us to the mystery and immensity of life; and how it lays open the possibility of transformation. He encourages the sharing of experiences of the dying to be shared with the living. Roche cites *Gaudium et Spes*'s teaching that espouses the Second Vatican Council's conviction that God has called us to

---

<sup>8</sup> James W. Roche. *Facing Death: Discovering Life*. Ottawa, ON: Catholic Health Care Association of Canada. 2000. 51.

<sup>9</sup> Roche. *Facing Death: Discovering Life*. 2-3.

an endless sharing of the divine life beyond death. As with other authors Roche explores the paradox:

Facing death and entering into the anguish and suffering that accompany it can be an experience in discovering life. Death which we will all live one day, is not an encounter with meaninglessness; it is the fulfillment of life.<sup>10</sup>

Roche reminds us and challenges us in this work:

One thing is clear, however. The root cause of much of the misery associated with dying today is the denial of death and the fact that our society has no positive vision with regard to life's end.<sup>11</sup>

The Catholic Church affirms that every human life has value and that conscious living and dying is the path of human dignity. The life, death and resurrection of Christ offers believers a positive vision for life's end. But like other areas the Catholic community is affected by the secular culture in which we live. It is therefore critical to inspire the community to enter into the mysteries of death and eternal life with a sense of wonder. The Church can continually proclaim what death can be as opposed to what death is for those ruled by fear and anxiety.

### **Insights for the Living shared by those Who were Dying**

The experience of facing death can result in deeper self-awareness, seeking deeper meaning in life, and reconciliation for family and friends. In Dr. David Kuhl's work *What Dying People Want*, this palliative care physician turned psychologist, shares experiences of patients living with terminal illness and important lessons in living. It is possible to find meaning and hope when facing death by recognizing death as part of our

---

<sup>10</sup> *Gaudium et Spes*, on the Church in the Modern World. Pastoral Constitution. 1965. Retrieved March 21, 2021, from [https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_const\\_19651207\\_gaudium-et-spes\\_en.html](https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html) Sourced from Roche page 4.

<sup>11</sup> Roche. *Facing Death: Discovering Life*. 9.

being. Only in confronting the inevitability of death can one truly embrace life. Kuhl advises it is fear, silence and the avoidance of difficult topics that keep individuals from living fully. Difficult topics can be addressed with preparation and by embracing virtues such as courage and prudence.<sup>12</sup>

Kuhl also advises that just as people live unique lives, they die unique deaths. In as much as he started out writing the book to guide the process of dying, he found dying also helps the process of living. His key question to the reader is: “Do I embrace life, or do I prepare to die?”<sup>13</sup> The very last line in his book is poignant: “**And only in confronting the inevitability of death does one truly embrace life.**”<sup>14</sup> Kuhl indicates living fully and dying well involve enhancing one’s sense of self, one’s relationships with others, and one’s understanding of the transcendent, the spiritual and the supernatural. In Kuhl’s experience people who know they have a terminal illness speak about the spiritual, the transcendent as though it were real. Believers and non-believers explore their connection to something greater than themselves. Patients pay greater attention to their inner voices and Kuhl observes it seems dying patients enter a process of transition from outward journey to an inward one moving to a new consciousness away from superficiality of routine to a deeper attention to the soul.

One of Kuhl’s chapters is devoted to the value of conducting a life review. This process is a recurring theme in many psychology, palliative care, and other professional journals. Gerontologists Gary Kenyon and William Randall wrote in *Restoring our Lives*, the richest resource for meaning and healing is one we already possess...in the material

---

<sup>12</sup> David R. Kuhl. *What Dying People Want: Practical Wisdom for the End of Life*. Toronto: Anchor Canada, 2002. 290.

<sup>13</sup> Kuhl. *What Dying People Want*. 291.

<sup>14</sup> Kuhl. *What Dying People Want*. 291.

of our own life story.<sup>15</sup> Although likely including a component of grief, Kuhl reminds us a life review contains happy moments in life including love, joy, gratitude, and other experiences. It is a process of reflection leading to a process of understanding and finding meaning in life. It assists in addressing unresolved relationships, grief, and other aspects. Although the life review can lead to unexpected emotions such as despair and hopelessness, for many it is a positive experience resulting in contentment and hope.

In a 2008 *Journal of Palliative Medicine* article exploring the function of a life review and life completion discussions, the theme of making sense of a life lived was explored at length. When palliative patients engage in life completion discussions and have a chance to reminisce, reconcile, forgive and resolve past conflicts – tangible improvements are achieved in psychological well-being and life satisfaction.<sup>16</sup>

Intervention content included the life review, themes of forgiveness, as well as themes of heritage and legacy. Providing an opportunity to look forward and set goals for the future supports the human development model and assumes that personal growth may occur throughout all stages of life. In the study, many participants were within weeks and sometimes days of death.

Psychiatrist Dr. Elisabeth Kubler-Ross's work with the dying provides insights on the dying and dying process. In her early work she formulated the theory of five stages of dying: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. She tried to help people understand lessons from working with dying patients. She explains: "Dying patients not

---

<sup>15</sup> Kuhl. *What Dying People Want*. 140. Dr. Kuhl was interviewed in the summer of 2019 providing rich insights on particular area of his book and experiences.

<sup>16</sup> Steinhauser, K. E., Alexander, S. C., Byock, I. R., George, L. K., Olsen, M. K., & Tulskey, J. A. *Do preparation and life completion discussions improve functioning and quality of life in seriously ill patients? Pilot randomized control trial. Journal of Palliative Medicine, 11(9), 1234-1240.*  
doi:10.1089/jpm.2008.0078 Page 1235.

only teach us about the process of dying but also what we can learn about how to live in such a way that we have no unfinished business.”<sup>17</sup> Dr. Kubler-Ross advocated for finishing business which included a life review. In her work she states that perhaps the most important question we must face as humans is the definition, meaning and purpose of life and death.<sup>18</sup>

Another interesting source is the surgeon Dr. Atul Gawande and his book *Being Mortal*. As a physician he addressed the current state of medicine and what matters in the end. His premise is that medicine often fails the people it is supposed to help. His own medical school experience left him poorly prepared to talk about death and difficult topics. Because society avoids the topic of death, Dr. Gawande has seen first-hand the grasping at life through expensive medical interventions when an acceptance of death and natural dying likely would have been much better for the patient and the family. Like Kuhl, he too believes that patients with serious illness have priorities besides simply prolonging their lives.<sup>19</sup> He referred to *ars moriendi*, the art of dying from Christian tradition where people believed death should be accepted, without fear or self pity or hope, for anything more than the forgiveness of God. Last words came to hold a particular place of reverence. Gawande counsels to embrace courage as strength in the face of knowledge of what is to be feared or hoped. He states:

Technological society has forgotten what scholars call the “dying role” and its importance to people as life approaches its end. People want to share memories, pass on wisdoms and keepsakes, settle relationships, establish their legacies, make peace with God, and ensure that those who are left behind will be okay.<sup>20</sup>

---

<sup>17</sup> Elisabeth Kubler-Ross. *The Tunnel and the Light: Essential Insights on Living and Dying*. 42.

<sup>18</sup> Kubler-Ross. *The Tunnel and the Light*. 80.

<sup>19</sup> Atul Gawande. *Being Mortal*. Toronto: Anchor Canada, 2017. 155.

<sup>20</sup> Gawande. *Being Mortal*. 249.

The dying play a role in helping the living learn what matters most. Conversely helping the living to better understand the process of dying and what the dying need, helps their formation and appreciation of life and living. Research did not find empirical evidence linking those who have pre-arranged funeral and burial plans with a sense of liberation from death anxiety. However the insights from health professionals who interviewed dying patients demonstrates that patients addressing death come to accept mortality and go through some meaningful questioning of the purpose of life and death. It is logical to find ways to extend this wisdom to those not facing their mortality so an earlier acceptance of mortality can avert unnecessary anxiety.

### **The Role of Religion in the Human Experience of Death and Dying**

Monsignor Luigi Giussani, founder of the international Catholic movement Communion and Liberation, and author of more than 20 books, explains religion's role: Religion is, in fact, nothing other than the attempt to construct the way in which man imagines his relationship with his destiny in theory, ethics and ritual.<sup>21</sup> Theologian and author William C. Mattison III wrote his book *Introducing Moral Theology* with the main question "what is the good life?" He states the answer of what constitutes a good life as being happiness...a good life is a fulfilling, satisfying, rewarding, flourishing...life.<sup>22</sup> He counsels that living happily depends on a truthful understanding of ourselves, the world

---

<sup>21</sup> Luigi Giussani. *The Religious Sense*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1997. 106.

<sup>22</sup> William C. Mattison III. *Introducing Moral Theology True Happiness and the Virtues*. Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2008. 12.

around us and the world beyond. He points to St. Augustine who explains the love of God and neighbour that Christ commands of us is the true path to happiness.<sup>23</sup>

Human beings have both a biological and a spiritual quest for life. According to ancient philosophers and theologians, humans seek meaning from their experiences. Religion provides assurances of some form of eternity. The great paradox is to understand the meaning of death to overcome the myopic dread of bodily death (Dunne, O'Connor). By addressing mortality, humans can be liberated from the fear of death and better embrace their eternal destiny in a spirit of hope. **Death plays a role in this quest for meaning and fulfillment.** Death is part of being baptised into the life, death, and resurrection of Christ's life. Attachment to God, a set of divine beliefs to God as loving, caring, and supportive (Kirkpatrick, 2004) is associated with a decrease in death anxiety (Jung, 2018).<sup>24</sup> **Meaning and experience provide personal fulfillment.** Humans face a life task of defining a legacy and meaning to seek lasting significance. Those who feel estranged from religion or who have never been personally exposed to religious beliefs through positive personal experiences may follow cultural practices which often are not based on religious traditions and theology. Religious traditions serve the important role to help healing and to help a family make sense of a life lived.

---

<sup>23</sup> Mattison. 25. Augustine's *On the Way of Life of the Catholic Church* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1966). Augustine arrives at the great commandment to love God and neighbour as the summation of the happy life. Mattison (PhD, University of Notre Dame) is assistant professor of theology at The Catholic University of America at the time of writing *Introducing Moral Theology*.

<sup>24</sup> Attachment Theory was outlined in a chapter of David Kuhl's book *What Dying People Want*. Developed in the early 1970s by psychologists Mary Ainsworth and John Bowlby, attachment theory examined early parent-child relationships as either being securely attached, ambivalent or avoidant in attachment. Themes of longing to belong can provide some basis to understand a person's attachment to God or ambivalence.

*In Sense of Divine Involvement and Sense of Meaning in Life: Religious Tradition as a Contingency*, Professor John Hyun Jung of Purdue University contributed for the *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*. Jung explains:

One's sense of meaning in life – defined as an individual's feelings that one has purpose or direction in life – is a key predictor of mental health (Klinger 1977; Park 2005b; Stroop, Draper, and Whitehead 2013). People need to feel that their lives are significant, purposeful, and understandable. The pursuit of meaning, which some scholars believe is the primary motivational force in life (Frankl 1962), is associated with a wide range of mental health (Krause 2003; Recker 1997) and even physical health outcomes (Krause 2004). Individuals with a greater sense of meaning in life have a set of goals in life that fosters a sense of optimism (Emmons 2005). In particular, this sense of optimism is positively associated with subjective well-being in times of stress and adversity.<sup>25</sup>

Jung goes on to write: “those for whom religion is highly salient are more likely to report higher levels of sense of meaning in life (Petersen and Roy 1985).” Several other studies demonstrate that people who believe in God report a greater sense of meaning in their lives. The 2007 Baylor Religion Survey discovered that the belief in a loving God increased the likelihood of having a strong sense of meaning and purpose. Highly religious people may see God as a “safe haven” for them; in this way, God is the ultimate attachment figure (Kirkpatrick 2005).<sup>26</sup>

Father Robert Spitzer S.J., PhD is a formative educator on physics, philosophy, reason and faith. He defined in *The Four Levels of Happiness* a framework examining levels of desire. Spitzer provides a general definition of happiness as “the fulfillment of desire” whereas unhappiness would be the nonfulfillment of desire.<sup>27</sup> After Spitzer investigated philosophy, psychological and theological systems of happiness, Spitzer's

---

<sup>25</sup> John Hyun Jung. *Sense of Divine Involvement and Sense of Meaning in Life: Religious Tradition as a Contingency*. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*. 2015. 54(I): 119-133.

<sup>26</sup> Jung. *Sense of Divine Involvement and Sense of Meaning in Life*. 119-133.

<sup>27</sup> Robert Spitzer. *Finding True Happiness: Satisfying Our Restless Hearts*. San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2015. 67-79.



model indicates the highest level of happiness as transcendent and as transcendent beings we recognize and desire the transcendent in the spiritual, the sacred, and the religious. Encyclopedia Britannica defines transcendence as a means going beyond a limit or surpassing a boundary. The divine is said to transcend humanity.<sup>28</sup> We have a trans-physical soul capable of surviving bodily death (Spitzer, Kubler Ross).<sup>29</sup> Spitzer encourages us not to ignore this nature else we risk:

Underliving our lives, undervaluing our dignity, and underestimating our destiny...furthermore, if we ignore the inspiration, guidance, protection, and wisdom of divine providence, we tie an arm and a leg behind our backs and ignore the immensity of divine assistance that will help us optimize purpose, dignity, and destiny.<sup>30</sup>

To live fully, humans need to understand their nature. Being accepting of mortality is an important task to prepare for transcendent destiny.

Humanity from the beginning has been called to a destiny – a supernatural destiny – of union with God, which is made perfectly visible in the ultimate sacrament, or symbol of God’s presence with us: Jesus Christ. This is eternal life, most properly understood not simply as life without end (eternal) but as life without any limitation, sometimes translated as the fullness of life.... It is complete happiness, fulfillment. Indeed, Christian faith as knowledge of these truths is actually a foretaste of our supernatural destiny of eternal life in union with God.<sup>31</sup>

The Thomist philosopher and author Josef Pieper, writing decades before Spitzer, spoke of humans as pilgrims on earth and in a condition of “*status viatoris*,” the condition or state of “*being on the way*,” which he calls a basic concept of every Christian rule of life. The journey involves comprehending, encompassing, and arriving. To be a *viator*

---

<sup>28</sup> Encyclopedia Britannica. Transcendence definition. Sourced from <https://www.britannica.com/topic/transcendence> April 2021.

<sup>29</sup> Elisabeth Kübler-Ross. *On death and dying: Questions and answers on death and dying; On life after death*. New York: Quality Paperback Book Club. 2002.

<sup>30</sup> Robert Spitzer. *Finding True Happiness: Satisfying Our Restless Hearts*. San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2015. 281.

<sup>31</sup> William C. Mattison. *Introducing Moral Theology True Happiness and the Virtues*. Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2008. 224.

means making progress towards eternal happiness. To be a comprehensor is what Pieper refers to as one who has comprehended, encompassed, arrived, whom no longer is a viator, and who now possesses beatitude.<sup>32</sup> The Church must help its members comprehend, encompass and journey towards eternity.

Father Benedict Groeschel was a popular American theologian and clinical psychologist who authored many books and spoke on many occasions on the Eternal Word Television Network (EWTN). Groeschel bridges psychology and spirituality in his works and teaches that spiritual development is built on divine grace...and for the believer, ultimate blessedness or happiness is to come to God. This offers different definitions of being on the way making progress towards eternal happiness. Father Groeschel uses classical terminology in his works to help the wayfarer think clearly about death by living fully in God's grace today. He called this the *unitive way*, living in conformity to the divine will. The *unitive way* follows stages that are traditionally the *purgative way* and the *illuminative way*. The *purgative way* commences with some integration through petition and meditation; the *illuminative way* is a maturing phase with contemplation and meditations; the *unitive way* is a higher level of spiritual life with infused contemplation.<sup>33</sup>

To make progress towards eternal happiness, a mindset of being proactive and destiny are habits to be encouraged. In 1989 Stephen Covey published *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, a best-selling book on personal change. Covey was a man of deep Christian faith with a PhD in religious education. The first two habits (of the seven

---

<sup>32</sup> Josef Pieper *Faith, Hope, Love*. San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2012. 91-92.

<sup>33</sup> Benedict Groeschel. *Spiritual Passages: The Psychology of Spiritual Development*. New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1983. 110-119.

specified in the book) include: (1) *Being Proactive*, and (2) *Begin with the End in Mind*.<sup>34</sup>

In being proactive, he teaches the importance of taking responsibility for your reactions to experiences and to take initiative to respond positively to improve a situation. In the chapter *Begin with the End in Mind*, he counsels readers to envision what they want in the future so they can work and plan towards it. Catholics can be encouraged to apply these lessons “to begin with the end in mind” – eternal life and union with God. If the Church starts with heaven and encourages education, understanding and practical preparation She can help the community on a healthy pilgrimage towards their ultimate Christian destiny.

Members of a faith community report higher satisfaction, a factor that can be encouraged in having people join and participate in community. The Gallup organization has been doing longitudinal studies for decades. Using its survey tool to measure the spiritual health of a parish with results monitored in the aggregate. In an empirical data report covering 2001-2005, macro results were reported on the measurement of life satisfaction:

Among the general population, 43% agree that they are completely satisfied with their lives. Among engaged church members, 61% strongly agree that they are completely satisfied with their lives. As engagement declines, so does life satisfaction. Only 40% of non-engaged members strongly agree that they are completely satisfied with their lives and 23% of actively disengaged members are completely satisfied.<sup>35</sup>

By participating in engaged parish life, life satisfaction is reported to be higher. Part of this increase over disengaged members is not only the social and spiritual support, but in

---

<sup>34</sup> Stephen Covey. *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*. London: Simon & Schuster, 1989.

<sup>35</sup> Al Winseman. *Growing an Engaged Church*. Measuring the Unmeasurable: Gallup’s ME25 and Empirical Data. Data from 2001-2005. Highlighting Life Satisfaction.

part being connected to a faith community focused on the meaning related to Jesus Christ. An extension of the life satisfaction message can support deeper meaning and engagement with the mission of the Church.

The Church, in her educational role, must continue to show the wisdom, the healing, and the beauty of tradition and make them understood in the present cultural milieu. Inherent here is the challenge facing clergy and lay leaders, particularly when there is low frequency of speaking of the funeral and sacred burial from the pulpit. In a study interviewing sixty-eight clergy in the Diocese of Phoenix Arizona, only two had spoken on this ritual over a twelve-month period whereas the majority had spoken of baptism and marriage.<sup>36</sup> The Church has outstanding material to promote the funeral ritual and sacred burial allowing our community to have a healthy relationship with death and what it means in terms of eternal life, but it must be communicated to the faithful.

### **Religious Awareness affects Outlook on Life and Death**

Luigi Giussani wrote an informative essay titled *Religious Awareness in Modern Man*, with a point of view on how modern man approaches (or does not approach) his mortality, he wrote:

- 1) Reason-as-the-measure-of-all-things has led man to fear not only the loss of his life in death, but also the fear of the *loss of his very humanity*. A boundless bewilderment takes hold of man as he faces the enigma of human and personal destiny.
- 2) The man of our time understands the values that originate with Christianity, but he is unable to believe, and this leaves him terribly incomplete. The sadness of being incomplete is precisely what occupies the great minds of our day. Incapable of belief, the man of today, in an extreme and desperate act of loyalty, cries out longingly for some final positive affirmation; he cries out what Christ with

---

<sup>36</sup> Dr. Ryan Hanning. Primary interview findings of 68 Phoenix Diocesan priests. Findings presented at the Catholic Cemeteries of the West conference. January 2017.

complete awareness had cried out before he died: “Into your hands I commend my spirit.”<sup>37</sup>

Reason alone, without faith or the possibility or experience of the reality of God, leads to the fear of loss, the enigma of destiny, a sense of incompleteness, and big questions left unanswered. Every human, confronted with the experience of human suffering and death finds themselves dealing with immediate and transcendent questions of meaning. Giussani points out that Christ left us to be human, but he made us restless creatures with a tension towards destiny.<sup>38</sup> A person’s outlook, and anxiety about death, can be attributed to a lack of religious awareness. Giussani refers to a speech by French Roman Catholic writer and historian Henri Daniel-Rops. Daniel-Rops speaks of a fatal illness that has infected the heart of modern man. He explains some root causes eroding or impeding man’s religious awareness:

*Self-Made Man* – the shift to the “successful man who relies on his own forces” where the value of his life is no longer founded upon an objective relationship with God.

*Decline of Awareness of Limitations* – from selfishness we see a turn to nature versus an understanding of “who may give one wings of the dove.”

*Age of Rationalism/ Science* – man’s bending nature to his own purposes. Life and the cosmos are no longer God but man and his use of reason.

*Reduction* – if God does exist, he does not matter, or he will make it relative.

Giussani speaks of the dominant cultural influence as secularism with its assertion that people belong to themselves and no one else causing a terrible impasse confronting the religious awareness of human beings in our day.<sup>39</sup> Therefore, one’s outlook on death is very much the product of current secularism, poor religious awareness and the

---

<sup>37</sup> Giussani, *Religious Awareness*. 120. The words “loss of his humanity” were italicized.

<sup>38</sup> Giussani, *Religious Awareness*. 107.

<sup>39</sup> Giussani, *Religious Awareness*. 114.

predominance of the self. Giussani goes on to describe the “cultural bewilderment of modern man” defining an anthropology of corruption. Humanity has lost the purpose of its own existence but fortunately has also become aware of his incapacity to realize their own humanity.<sup>40</sup> Giussani outlines the basic human drama as the failure of man to perceive the meaning of life and “religious sense” as engagement by the whole person with the whole of life’s meaning.<sup>41</sup>

This chapter explained the human predisposition to search for meaning, the role of religion in this search for meaning, and the failures of this search for many noted by religious writers with these writers re-asserting that Jesus Christ remains the answer to existential problems. Jesus of Nazareth is the definitive revelation of the mystery of God – of the final meaning and destiny of all things – and mankind can live this in relationship with Christ. Giussani states “Jesus Christ came to call man back to true religiosity.”<sup>42</sup> Christ conquered evil, sin and death with the pathway to meaning in heaven for each human. It is the role of the Church through each of her members and all of her institutions, to preach, exhort, explain and to testify to these truths so that individuals may believe, have hope and know love.

For most people, death is an inescapable meeting with the mystery of the unknown. Unfortunately, anxiety about death and the avoidance of talking about it or its meaning, despite the Christian context, has become a characteristic of modern Western society.

---

<sup>40</sup> Giussani, *Religious Awareness*. 122.

<sup>41</sup> Luigi Giussani. *At the Origin of the Christian Claim*. McGill-Queen’s University Press. Montreal & Kingston. 1998. 97.

<sup>42</sup> Giussani, *At the Origin of the Christian Claim*. 96.

## Chapter 2 The Problem of Death Anxiety and Avoidance

This chapter looks at freedom, the roots of death in the human experience and the Christian experience of anxiety. Death anxiety, repression and outright avoidance in talking about death have become characteristic of North American culture. The Encyclopedia Britannica defines anxiety as a feeling of dread, fear, or apprehension. The emotion is distinguished from fear because fear arises in response to a clear and actual danger. Anxiety arises in response to apparently innocuous situations or is the product of subjective, internal emotional conflicts the causes of which may not be apparent to the person himself.<sup>43</sup> Bodily death is an actual reality faced by all humans and the majority of journal articles speak of death anxiety which encompasses feelings of fear such as fear of the unknown, fear of pain, fear of being alone and forgotten, and fear of judgment or punishment. Death in a Christian context is a transition to eternal life, not an actual danger.

According to Catholic teaching, man's journey to God is founded in the gift of freedom. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* article 1730 states:

God created man a rational being, conferring on him the dignity of a person who can initiate and control his own actions. God willed that man should be 'left in the hand of his own counsel,' so that he might of his own accord seek his Creator and freely attain his full and blessed perfection of cleaving to him.<sup>44</sup>

In current culture this freedom has not always been fruitful. The Church's teaching in the *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* broadens this definition of freedom:

Man can turn to good only in freedom, which God has given to him as one of the highest signs of his image.<sup>45</sup> This freedom is given so that he can seek his Creator

---

<sup>43</sup> Encyclopedia Britannica online using the term anxiety. Sources from <https://www.britannica.com/science/anxiety> April 2021.

<sup>44</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1730.

<sup>45</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1705.

spontaneously and come freely to utter and blissful perfection through loyalty to Him. But his freedom is not unlimited: it must halt before the “tree of knowledge of good and evil,” for it is called to accept the moral law given by God. We see further a call for the person and society to be obedient to truth when they do not presume to be creators and absolute masters of truth.<sup>46</sup>

Man has sought to understand how death entered the world. The experience of death and suffering in the human experience is accounted for in the first pages of Genesis. In Catholic Christianity, the primal Revelation about sin and death finds its full explication in the incarnation, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. In Genesis, death entered the human experience through Adam and Eve’s disobedience to God by eating from the Tree of Knowledge. Adam and Eve became the embodiment of forgetfulness of the divine.<sup>47</sup> Their human nature becomes corrupted, and they experience suffering, work, and physical death. In today’s secular world, man has inherited this fallen state and seems to have inherited a lack of awareness of God and His omnipresence.

Church teaching is that human beings need God’s help through Jesus Christ to awaken our awareness of God’s presence and to understand the cost of sin as eternal death versus the hope of eternal life. God does not want men to suffer and die. God’s original idea for man was paradise, to live forever with peace between God and man and their environment. Because sin crept in, Adam and Eve had to leave paradise.<sup>48</sup> They inherited bodily death. In the second section of *Evangelium Vitae*, Pope John Paul II’s Gospel of Life, proclaims:

The Gospel of life, proclaimed in the beginning when man was created in the image of God for a destiny of full and perfect life (cf. Gen 2:7; Wis 9:2-3), is contradicted by the painful experience of **death which enters the world and**

---

<sup>46</sup> *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*. Ottawa: Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2005. 135,136, 138.

<sup>47</sup> Allan Kellehear. *How Death Came into the World*. Encyclopedia of Death and Dying, 3 March 2019, <http://www.deathreference.com/Ho-Ka/How-Death-Came-into-the-World.html>

<sup>48</sup> *YouCat Youth Catechism of the Catholic Church*. San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2010. 374-379.



**casts its shadow of meaninglessness** over man's entire existence. Death came into the world as a result of the devil's envy (cf. Gen 3:1,4-5) and the sin of our first parents (cf. Gen 2:17, 3:17-19).<sup>49</sup>

The shadow of death is upon the human condition. Humanity has pursued its own truth through a misguided use of freedom distancing itself from God and the Christian meaning of death.

Anxiety around death is a reality in every age, particularly in modern Western culture. A significant trigger for anxiety concerns bodily illness, particularly if the sickness is associated with diseases that may be more traditionally associated with dying. In an article titled *Death anxiety, coping and spirituality among cancer patients*, authors explain the suffering of cancer patients triggers fear about death and how it is an existential issue (Gonen, Kaymak, Candurtaran, Karslioglu, Oxlap, & Sougur, 2012). To deal with any kind of anxiety or stressful situation an individual constantly engages in strategies to get out of those situations using coping mechanisms:

Religious and spiritual coping have been associated with lower levels of patient discomfort as well as reduced hostility, anxiety, and social isolation in cancer patients (Janiszewski, Oeffinger, Church, Dunn, Eshelman, Victor, et al., 2007). Specific characteristics of strong religious beliefs including hope, optimism, freedom from regret, and life satisfaction, have also been associated with improved adjustment in individuals diagnosed with cancer (Weisman & Worden, 1977; Pargment, 1997).<sup>50</sup>

The authors speak of anxiety as a normal reaction to cancer. They include a useful definition of death anxiety sourced from the British National Health Service (2008) as a: “feeling of dread, apprehension or solicitude (anxiety) when one thinks of the process of

---

<sup>49</sup> *Evangelium Vitae, on the Value and Inviolability of Human Life*. 1995. John Paul II. Retrieved March 21, 2021, from [http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_enc\\_25031995\\_evangelium-vitae.html](http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_25031995_evangelium-vitae.html)

<sup>50</sup> C.R. Satish Kumar, & Neha Parashar. (2015). *Death anxiety, coping and spirituality among cancer patients*. Indian Journal of Positive Psychology, 6(3), 291-294. [http://www.iahrw.com/index.php/home/journal\\_detail/19#list](http://www.iahrw.com/index.php/home/journal_detail/19#list)

dying or ceasing to be or what happens after death.” Author and professor John Hyun confirms that human beings tend to view death as an existential crisis which often leads to anxiety about death and the dying process. Death anxiety is regarded as one of the most pervasive concerns for older adults in the United States (Cicirelli, 2002) and is likely true in Canada. Jung concludes “one of the most important functions of religious belief is reducing the terror surrounding the prospect of one’s mortality” (Friedman 2008: 231). Like a parent-child relationship, attachment to God provides a haven of protection in an uncertain, dangerous environment.<sup>51</sup>

The Protestant philosopher and theologian Paul Tillich presents anxiety as a modern psychological epidemic resulting from a loss of meaning in life. He distinguishes three types of anxiety: fate and death, emptiness and loss of meaning (spiritual), guilt and condemnation.<sup>52</sup> Tillich presents courage as anxiety’s antidote – the strength to affirm one’s own life, a “striving toward self-preservation or toward self-affirmation.” He counsels affirmation of one’s own being, accepting one’s finitude and inevitable nonbeing, with courage to relieve any anxiety of death.

On a broader cultural level, Ernest Becker, an American cultural anthropologist, professor and author of the 1974 Pulitzer Prize winning book, *The Denial of Death*, explains that man’s basic motivation is to control basic anxiety and to deny the terror of death by conspiring with the culture to keep it unconscious. Individuals can choose to despair or to trust in what Soren Kierkegaard called “*sacrosanct vitality of the cosmos.*”<sup>53</sup>

---

<sup>51</sup> John Hyun Jung. *Attachment to God and Death Anxiety in Later Life: Does Race Matter?* Research on Aging. 40(10): 956-977.

<sup>52</sup> Paul Tillich. *The Courage to Be*. 2nd edition. New Haven, Yale University, 2000 (1<sup>st</sup> ed. 1952). 38-50.

<sup>53</sup> Ernest Becker. *The Denial of Death*. New York: Free Press Paperbacks, 1973. Forward XV.

Becker revisited the definition of “will-to-live” as a blind incessant impulse without knowledge that drives instinctive behaviours, causing an endless insatiable striving in human existence. It is a sense of self-preservation, usually coupled to a future sense and a psychological force to fight for self-preservation. It helps to understand why humans go to extraordinary measures to live as long-as they can, even in the face of disease and dying. Death, with its association to pain and discomfort is a topic rarely discussed unless confronted out of necessity. The book *The Worm at the Core: On the Role of Death in Life*, written by three social psychologists (former Becker students), informs the reader that all living beings are born with biological systems oriented toward self-preservation. They talk about how the animal kingdom, including humans, adhere to the fundamental biological imperative – staying alive.<sup>54</sup> Humans are hard wired to stay alive, so death is counter to our innate nature. Biological impulse affects our beliefs and behaviours including avoidance and general repression of death. Studies show people spending little time contemplating their mortality. Authors Solomon, Greenberg and Pyszczynski provide reasons and psychological defenses to cope with the thoughts of death. When we are conscious of death, our proximal defenses are activated to get rid of such thoughts.

We either repress these uncomfortable thoughts, try to distract ourselves, or push the problem of death into the distant future. In contrast, unconscious thoughts of death instigate our distal defenses. These defenses have no logical or semantic relation to the problem of death. Prescribing harsher punishment for criminals, derogating others repudiate our cultural values, or attempting to boost our self-esteem has little or no direct bearing on the brute fact that we will someday die. Nevertheless, such reactions muffle mortal terror because they support the belief that we will endure in some literal or symbolic form beyond our death.<sup>55</sup>

---

<sup>54</sup> Sheldon Solomon and Jeff Greenberg and Tom Pyszczynski. *The Worm at the Core: On the Role of Death in Life*. UK: Penguin Random House UK, 2016. 5.

<sup>55</sup> Solomon. *The Worm at the Core*. 171.

This helps explain why most people believe they do not think about death or that they are not affected by such thoughts, despite being exposed to frequent messages of death and dying. Another insight from the authors of *The Worm at the Core*, a title speaking of death as the worm in the core of the apple of life, that world and cultural views can provide “seductive psychological security,” and with some constructive paths more transcendent than others. A sense of psychological security is a further deterrent to engaging in preparing for end-of-life.

In a section titled *Coming to Terms with Death*, the authors speak of how people can become psychologically fortified. They highlight Christian philosophers such as Soren Kierkegaard and Martin Heidegger and the role of religion:

For some philosophers and theologians after Kierkegaard, all of the world’s religions can serve the same transformative function (referring to Kierkegaard’s proposal to allow the fear of death to be addressed in the hopes of eliminating death anxiety to spur people to a deeper appreciate of life). Other existential thinkers insist that a deep confrontation with one’s own mortality requires no formal religious allegiance. Martin Heidegger argued that every individual must recognize that she or he is a “being toward death,” and because everyone dies his or her own death, authentic living by courageous awareness and acceptance of death is of necessity a personal undertaking.<sup>56</sup>

Heidegger has argued that we live our lives in the denial of death. Julian Young, in discussing Heidegger’s view, refers to this denial of death as the “illusion of immortality.”<sup>57</sup> With others, Young supports that the fear of death explains why people repress the thought of death. *The Worm at the Core* authors go on to speak of spiritual rituals in experiential transcendence:

Finally, experiential transcendence is characterized by a sense of timelessness accompanied by a heightened sense of awe and wonder. Certain drugs can foster

---

<sup>56</sup> Solomon. *The Worm at the Core*: 220.

<sup>57</sup> Julian Young. *The Death of God and the Meaning of Life*. Routledge. London. 2003 as cited in the *Journal of Philosophy of Life* Vol.5, No.2 (August 2015): 62-81.

this kind of experience, as can meditation, various cultural rituals, and activities that provide a sense of flow, of losing oneself in contemplation and enjoyment. And such experiential states are most fulfilling when they occur in the context of one of the four other modes: playing with your children, **engaging in spiritual rituals**, throwing yourself into creative activity, being immersed in the natural world.<sup>58</sup>

Father Benedict Groeschel explains that throughout his years in clinical counselling practice the most common problems presented were fear and anxiety:

Almost forty years of working as a psychologist have taught me that the most common personal problem of sane people is anxiety and fear. Someone has perceptively written: “we are afraid to live and afraid to die.” And this is the truth – often we lead partial lives, afraid to take risks, afraid to live fully. We are too timid, too unsure, to fully commit ourselves in faith and trust to God and in love to other people as we spend our brief “day on earth” ...we do all that we can to avoid the plain fact that we are mortal...in denial we try and go on, living day after day, oblivious of the fact that we and those we care for will one day die.<sup>59</sup>

A few years before his death he was a victim of a hit-and-run accident and had no vital signs for thirty minutes. As a result of this experience, he experienced a new clarity about death. He is a great witness as someone living in the hope of the resurrection who had no fear of death. His encounter brought him to an experience of wonder and hope:

To be in a state of grace means that Christ lives within us. If we extinguish the life of Christ in us through serious sin, if we banish Him from our souls, we have separated ourselves and alienate ourselves from God. We have chosen eternal nothingness. We have chosen Hell.<sup>60</sup>

Groeschel informs us that death can be especially frightening because it is the end of all that is familiar to us. To the unbeliever it is a journey into nothingness. To the believer it represents a passage into a different and splendid domain of being.

---

<sup>58</sup> Solomon. *The Worm at the Core*. 222.

<sup>59</sup> Benedict J. Groeschel. *After this Life: What Catholics Believe About What Happens Next*. Huntington, IN. Our Sunday Visitor Publishing. 2009. 13.

<sup>60</sup> Groeschel. *After This Life*. 48.

### Anxiety about Death among Modern Christians

Theologian and author Hans Urs von Balthasar explains the essence of anxiety. He cites Thomas Aquinas' three forms of anxiety, brought to the mind by an external evil which can exceed man's power of resistance. These arouse anxiety and apply to the topic of death in our cultural milieu:

*Bewilderment* (stupor) – unusual and improbable character.

*Dread* (agonia) – unforeseeable character.

*Wonder* (admiratio) – dimensions indeterminate, fear can lead to inquiry.<sup>61</sup>

Von Balthasar explains that anxieties about death lie at the root of modern consciousness, a contemporary “neurosis” – perhaps referring to a loss of reality or irrational anxiety. Fear and hope are opposed to one another. The object of hope is defined as “a future good that is difficult but possible to attain” with the object of fear “a difficult future evil that cannot easily be avoided.” The prospect of death without understanding Christian destiny often triggers bewilderment or dread. It would be more beneficial if the prevailing attitude was one of wonder. The modern Catholic community is too often aligned with the broader cultural outlook on death, avoiding the topic. In von Balthasar's book *The Christian and Anxiety*, he provides a Christian interpretation of anxiety, its root meaning and man's anxiety in the light of Christ and the Trinity. Von Balthasar reframes anxiety from the central fact of Christian belief: God came to us in flesh in the divine person of Jesus Christ. Even anxiety has a Christological meaning, “God could not become man in

---

<sup>61</sup> Hans Urs von Balthasar. *The Christian and Anxiety*. San Francisco: Ignatius Press. 1989. 118-9.

any other way than by coming to know human fear and by taking it upon himself.”<sup>62</sup> His work lays down two perspectives:

- (1) On one hand, the Christian neither can, nor should have firsthand knowledge of anxiety, for by his passion and death Christ assumed and conquered it.
- (2) On the other hand, the Christian receives from Christ a participation in his redemptive anxiety.<sup>63</sup>

Von Balthasar teaches: Human fear has been completely and definitively conquered by the Cross. Anxiety is one of the authorities, powers, and dominions over which the Lord triumphed on the Cross

For God has not destined us for wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us. I Thessalonians 5:9-10

Anxiety about death and guilt lies at the root of modern consciousness. Anyone who suffers from excess anxiety, von Balthasar indicates, is suffering from a lack of Christian truth. A weak faith and poor understanding of the meaning of Christ’s life, death and Resurrection for them personally can create this anxiety. Society makes it harder for believers at many levels of faith to keep themselves free from anxiety. Von Balthasar informs us that freedom from anxiety demands a fearless “yes” to grace, offering guidance on Christian Anxiety:

- (1) Christianity is intent upon and capable of delivering man from sin-anxiety, provided he opens himself to that redemption and its conditions. Christianity provides access to God in faith, love, and hope.
- (2) We can always become sinners anew. We are permitted to leave sin-anxiety behind to the degree that we appropriate in truth the living faith offered to us from the Cross.

---

<sup>62</sup> von Balthasar. *The Christian and Anxiety*. 15.

<sup>63</sup> von Balthasar. *The Christian and Anxiety*. 20.

- (3) God grants participation in the anxiety of this Son on the Cross, which is participation in the love of God.<sup>64</sup>

## Historical Context on the Care for Human Remains and Outlook on Death

Over the course of the millennia, death is an evolutionary continuum according to Dr. Daniel Martin Varisco, PhD, author of *The End of Life, The Ends of Life: An Anthropological View*.<sup>65</sup> He holds that it is religion's role to explain death and what is common to humanity. He considers patterns in the evolution of human thinking of physical death. Varisco notes key findings about death: There has been evidence of deliberate burials going back 60-80.000 years, with ancient burials showing deliberate signs of ritual and memorial expressing significance, meaning or the circumstance of death. Cave art provides an example with an image of a person being killed by a bison.<sup>66</sup> Examples show that care has been provided to the dead, and belief in an afterlife is ancient and primordial. In ancient cultures death had been celebrated as a final ritual with elevation to a higher form of life. This is much more problematic in modern Western culture which makes the fear and avoidance of death part of its psychological character.<sup>67</sup> Burial provided protection of the remains against animals and respectful care of the deceased. Judaeo Christian scripture bears witness to the importance of respect and care of the dead and deeper meaning in the human experience. This respect and care were present in ancient Judaism and developed in Christian Revelation through to Christian belief and practices today.

---

<sup>64</sup> von Balthasar. *The Christian and Anxiety*. 87-90.

<sup>65</sup> Daniel Martin Varisco. *The End of Life, The Ends of Life: An Anthropological View*. The Journal of the Islamic Medical Association of North America. 43(3): 203–207. December 2011.

<sup>66</sup> Varisco. *The End of Life, The Ends of Life*. 203–207.

<sup>67</sup> Varisco. *The End of Life, The Ends of Life*. 203–207.



Considering ancient burial, let us look at the definition of cemetery as the more common place of burial. Encyclopedia Britannica defines a cemetery as: “A place set apart for burial or entombment of the dead. Reflecting geography, religious beliefs, social attitudes, and aesthetic and sanitary considerations, cemeteries may be simple or elaborate—built with a grandeur that overshines the community of the living.”<sup>68</sup> A cemetery, however primitive expresses society among the dead and provides protection for the living.

Although ancient Greeks and Romans practiced both cremation and burial, early Christian burial followed Jewish burial tradition, demonstrated by testimony of Tertullian with emphasis on the resurrection of the body and resurrection of Jesus Christ.<sup>69</sup> How Jesus Christ was buried – in a garden tomb as a normative practice – has had universal impact for the Christian Church and its communities around the world. The scope of this thesis cannot explore these dimensions in depth however it is important to point out that the burial of remains of the Christian dead has always been regarded as a significant religious act surrounded by ritual. Practices continued for centuries, varying based on local customs. During the Middle Ages, religious orders constructed cemeteries around their churches connecting them as a place of worship becoming “churchyard cemeteries.” This associated the dead with life, churchgoing, and the liturgical and community life of the Church. Historic churchyard cemeteries and religious cemeteries of various sizes exist today along with municipal cemeteries, national, and corporate cemeteries. Church canon law describes the Catholic cemetery is a sacred place. The Church provides cemeteries to

---

<sup>68</sup> Encyclopedia Britannica <https://www.britannica.com/topic/cemetery> 3 March 2021

<sup>69</sup> Tertullian, *De Corona* (in [Migne, Patrologia Latina](#) [P.L.], II, 92, 795); cf. Minucius Felix, *Octavius*, xi (P.L., III, 266) cf. [Tertullian, De Animâ, LV](#); [St. Augustine, De civitate Dei](#), I, 13 1 Corinthians 15:42

carry out the sacred religious function(s) of burial and to care for the resting places of the deceased.<sup>70</sup> A Catholic cemetery may be a small yard adjacent to a parish church or a separate site encompassing hundreds of acres. As a place dedicated and blessed for the burial of the faithful, it becomes identified with the local Church and gives witness to the faith of those who are buried as well as to the faith of their families (etymology: Latin *coemeterium*; from Greek *koimeterion*, sleeping chamber, burial place).<sup>71</sup> Today's larger Catholic cemetery organization contributes education and advisory services to the community.

### Reduced Connection to Death over Time

Alvin Toffler, an American author and futurist, wrote on large trends in human history. In his book *The Third Wave*,<sup>72</sup> he distinguishes three periods in human development: *the agricultural age*, *the manufacturing age* and *the information age*, the latter including the present day. These large societal trends have impacted the human experience with death. In agrarian society, man primarily lived-in small communities and was in tune with nature and its cycles. Humans were highly dependent on the cycle of the seasons and how they affected agriculture. When a death occurred, the family and local community helped with the care of the dead – washing and preparing the body, preparing the grave, burying the deceased, and providing support to the grieving family. Most funerals were conducted at home. People were more attuned to death's reality through these direct experiences. This dynamic began to change as humanity transitioned to the manufacturing age. People migrated to urban settings and lived-in higher population

---

<sup>70</sup> *Code of Canon Law*. [www.vatican.va](http://www.vatican.va). Retrieved 2019-04-17. 1205.

<sup>71</sup> *The Catholic Cemetery: A Vision for the Millennium*. Article 2.

<sup>72</sup> Alvin Toffler. *The Third Wave*. London. Black Rose Books, 1980.

density. They were more disconnected from each other. Death became more removed, with the advance of the funeral home profession shifting funerals from the community to paid workers.<sup>73</sup> These factors are with us today living in the information age, an age that ironically has people connected more than ever through technology but feeling more isolated and alone than in other major ages.

### **Impact of Major Conflicts on the Human Experience of Death**

Warfare in modern times has led to dialogues on death, the care of the dead, care of survivors, and the value of people not dying in vain. North American culture today places importance on deriving meaning from death. Drew Gilpin Faust analyzed the impact of the American Civil War on the care of the dead. In the later years of the American Civil War, the government expected decent burial for the fallen but were overwhelmed and unprepared for the number of deaths with tens of thousands of dead bodies left abandoned on battlefields. These horrors were brought to public attention through the new use of photography in the news.<sup>74</sup>

Faust noted that attitudes about death changed where death was very much seen as part of life and needed to be thought about constantly to live well and to die well. Soldiers arranged surrogates with fellow soldiers promising each other to take care of the body and to write to family members with news and provide memorial items home. Soldiers saw the obligation to care for the dead and to do so with kindness, care and in

---

<sup>73</sup> National Funeral Home Alliance. 3 March 2021. <https://www.homefuneralalliance.org/home-funeral-history.html>

<sup>74</sup> Drew Gilpin Faust. *The Republic of Suffering: Death and the American Civil War*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2012. 211-221.

due consideration for the living. This sense of responsibility changed how society saw the obligation of the living towards care of the dead.

When the first national cemetery was created through the *National Cemeteries Act (US)*, attitudes changed about death, as did the relationship of the country and its responsibilities to the individual.<sup>75</sup> Americans adopted a new meaning of the sacrifice of the dead in service to the country and lives were to be commemorated for their sacrifice to their respective war effort. This brought about a new relationship between state and soldiers. In the American Civil War, the dead were referred to as the “holy unburied,” an early example of religious language being adopted for secular or nationalistic reasons. Terms such as this became universally accepted. In the Civil War, 750,000 men were not identified properly. Unfortunately, many of the lessons were forgotten a mere forty-nine years later, on the battlefields of World War I.<sup>76</sup> These experiences left a legacy to search for meaning in man’s death, both on a societal and personal level. Cemeteries evolved in the continued care and respect of the dead. A democracy of the dead has developed with enormous war cemeteries displaying Christian crosses, Jewish Stars of David, and many different cultural symbols.

Another legacy of the American Civil War was the advent of the funeral home. With so many dead from the conflict, many grieving families wanted to see their loved ones. Embalming started as a means of preserving bodies for transportation and for viewing. Coffin makers evolved to become undertakers...undertaking tasks related to

---

<sup>75</sup> Faust. *The Republic of Suffering: Death and the American Civil War*. 224.

<sup>76</sup> The carnage of World War I and modern warfare is well chronicled in David Crane’s *Empires of the Dead*. This book is about the mass fatalities of the war and the enormous question of how to bury the dead. It highlights the situation that motivated Fabian Ware, an ambulance commander, to establish the *Commonwealth War Graves Commission*. History repeated itself, with few lessons learned from the Civil War experience.

care of the body and the family. Parlours opened which evolved into funeral homes, visitation centres and chapels that exist today in society. What was born as a need to ship dead soldiers back to families spawned an industry that has impacted society's beliefs about death. Both World War I and World War II featured significant deaths of service personnel and general populations. A significant change in how we viewed death started after World War II.

### **Medicalization of Death and Death as a Medical Failure**

By the 1950s, the public and medical profession were coming to believe in the “limitless powers of science and medicine to control and cure illness.”<sup>77</sup> Science became the new source of power and hope. Bolstered by advances in medical science, physicians focused increasingly on curative measures. Death came to be seen as a medical failure by many. The “burden of care and unpleasantness” of dying, once shared by neighbours and friends, had shifted from the home to the hospital as the place of death resulting in people dying alone or with few in attendance. There was a profound impact from this segregation as if, “society has banished death.” The period of sustained economic prosperity that followed World War II saw rapid development of new hospitals which accelerated the change of the place of birth and death from the home to the hospital. The human body became defined through medical realities and dying became defined as a medical event.<sup>78</sup> Death and aging were resisted and viewed as enemy combatants.

---

<sup>77</sup> Katherine Arnup. *Family Perspectives; Death and Dying in Canada*. Ottawa, ON. Vanier Institute on the Family. Ottawa: 2018. Citing Smith and Nickel. “Nursing the Dying” (2003). Page 330. citing Heanne C. Quint, *The Nurse and the Dying Patient*. Macmillan, New York, 1967. As seen in Family Perspectives: Dying and Death in Canada. Page 10.

<sup>78</sup> Susan Windley-Daoust. *The Sign of the Dying Body: How the Theology of the Body Helps Us to Die in Love*. *Homiletic & Pastoral Review*. November 20<sup>th</sup>, 2013.

In 1969 Dr. Elisabeth Kubler-Ross published *On Death and Dying*, noted in the earlier section of the thesis. Although Kubler-Ross's work was useful in promoting self-awareness her model is noted to simply describe a pattern of dying in the Western context.<sup>79</sup>

In the late 1960s Dame Cicely Saunders, medical director of St. Christopher's hospice in London, England from 1967-85, founded this first modern hospice and was influential in establishing palliative care. She promoted care of the whole person with dignity, compassion, respect. Her legacy contributed to the notion that not being able to cure someone was a not sign of failure. She has been called a modern-day Florence Nightingale.<sup>80</sup> In the 1980s the AIDS pandemic changed how society viewed dying realizing the importance of providing compassion to those suffering and dying. This plague was most prevalent to an element of society often outcast or secretive with predominantly younger people and many of which were estranged from traditional religious communities. The AIDS pandemic made society examine attitudes about death and its associated fears. The period often featured different rituals around dying and death, and different family structures and support structures. The positive role of the Church on the effects of this global pandemic are still to be evaluated and understood and appreciated in the context of attitudes towards death.

While the "funeral home" industry provides valuable services, it has contributed to the segregation of family and community from the deceased making the human experience less tactile and engaging. These trends, including the commercialization of the

---

<sup>79</sup> Windley-Daoust. *The Sign of the Dying Body: How the Theology of the Body Helps Us to Die in Love*.

<sup>80</sup> Caroline Richmond. *Dame Cicely Saunders, founder of the modern hospice movement, dies*. July 18, 2005. <https://www.bmj.com/content/suppl/2005/07/18/331.7509.DC1>

“industry,” have had a negative impact on how society views and experiences death, its familiarity, and its acceptance as part of life. It is important to note funeral home service professionals provide valuable guidance on dying, care of the body, health protection, coordination of services and bereavement support. Many providers are returning to offering families with the tactile experience of the death, such as washing the body.

Myths and misconceptions about death have increased in our society as people have grown more and more distant from death’s realities, religious practices, historic family practices and common cultural beliefs

In Dr. Varisco’s essay *The End of Life, The Ends of Life: An Anthropological View*, he explains that human death was once experienced as part of a cycle in harmony with nature. Religious, social, and cultural rituals served important social functions of healing, communal cohesion and support for well established beliefs in the immortality of the souls which may influence human destiny. Dr. Varisco comments on societal repression of death:

The anthropological lens has also been focused on Western culture, including the suggestion decades ago by Geoffrey Gorer that the **contemporary societal repression of death** has replaced sex as the most unmentionable topic, with the result ‘a society which denies mourning and gives no ritual support to mourners is thereby producing maladaptive and neurotic responses in a number of its citizens.’<sup>81</sup>

In 1955, sociologist Geoffrey Gorer, in his study “*The Pornography of Death*,”<sup>82</sup> argued that death has become invisible. Gorer explains humanity’s thwarted fascination with death is a result of distorted representations of death in the media. Gorer spoke of

---

<sup>81</sup> Varisco. *The End of Life, the Ends of Life*. Reference to Geoffrey Gorer. *The Pornography of Death*. Death: current perspectives. Palo Alto, CA: Mayfield; 1976. 71-76.

<sup>82</sup> John Tercier. *The Pornography of Death*. In: Maes H. (eds) *Pornographic Art and the Aesthetics of Pornography*. Palgrave Macmillan, London. 2013. [https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137367938\\_12](https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137367938_12)

this as a form of pornography, which blunts viewers' sensitivities to real "visible" experiences of death. In his review of Gorer's work, author John Tercier, a postdoctoral fellow in the history of medicine at the University of California, notes that most adults have not stood at a deathbed nor observed the moment of death (visible experience); yet by the age of eighteen, the average American has seen over 40,000 screen deaths (invisible experience) (Campbell 1999:7).<sup>83</sup>

Changes in population and the commercial development of funeral home services and cemeteries, particularly by large corporate operators, has led to deathcare being known as the "deathcare industry." This has further contributed to the shift from family funerals to commercial funerals and burials. In 1963 author Jessica Mitford wrote a scathing account of the American funeral industry. As an investigative journalist, she exposed unscrupulous practices, the escalation of costs, the dominance in the industry by corporations and practices that distance the family from direct care of the deceased.<sup>84</sup> These trends coupled with the medicalization of death have contributed to the repression of death and how society deals with death today. The 1965 movie *The Loved Ones* is a satire on the funeral industry that reflects the trivialization of death. It is reported to have drawn insights from Mitford's book.<sup>85</sup>

## 21<sup>st</sup> Century Experience with the Relativization of Ritual

Ritual has always played an important role in the human experience. In the context of death, funeral and burial rituals bring grief out into the open allowing the

---

<sup>83</sup> D. Campbell. *Hollywood Braces Itself for Violent End Guardian Weekly*, June 13, 1999, p. 7. Cited in Tercier.

<sup>84</sup> Jessica Mitford. *The American Way of Death Revisited*. New York NY. Random House. 2000.

<sup>85</sup> Lee Hill – *A Grand Guy: The Life and Art of Terry Southern*, Bloomsbury, 2001. 135.



process of healing to commence. Ritual helps individuals know what to expect resulting in familiarity and comfort. The *Order of Christian Funerals* offers Catholics the Vigil, the Funeral Mass, and graveside interment service. A Catholic cemetery offers sacred burial space blessed by an archbishop, bishop or priest, and a place that is a witness to Christian hope. These practices provide meaning, significance and comfort to the dying and those around them.

There are contemporary pressures on Catholic rituals and an erosion of the importance of rituals. The experience at the Roman Catholic Cemeteries of the Archdiocese of Vancouver (RCCAV) and corroborated at the Catholic Cemetery Conference, and many accounts indicated by clergy, is a reduction of “religious death,” namely the following of religious rituals from the *Order of Christian Funerals* with belief in the resurrection and with religious community support. Although the Covid-19 pandemic narrowed the cultural distance from death and dying, resulting restrictions in funeral sizes and gatherings will impact future practices: “A pandemic makes it impossible not to think about death.”<sup>86</sup> The impact of Covid-19 will be a likely area of future research with regards to its impact on how people view dying and death. Questions concerning whether it has made people more afraid of death will no doubt be addressed. It will be interesting to analyze whether people engaged more in pre-arrangement planning as a result of the pandemic given the heightened awareness of daily news of death counts and case statistics.

---

<sup>86</sup> Article. *Pandemic Narrows Americans’ Cultural Distance from Death and Dying*. National Catholic Reporter. Online. 13 December 2020.

For many, funerals have lost their value and meaning. Although different from the Catholic way, many modern ceremonies called “a celebration of life,”<sup>87</sup> are often well prepared and offer some fulfillment, but they fall short as “ritual” and tend to focus on the past without offering much hope for the future. Dr. Wolfelt, thanatologist and authority on bereavement, indicates this movement influences the attitude “*when I die, don’t go to any trouble.*”<sup>88</sup> Society’s mobile, fast-paced culture and emphasis on individualism has reinforced this attitude. During the Covid-19 pandemic, funeral homes in Metro Vancouver report a significant increase in “no rituals” with their direct cremation services.<sup>89</sup>

The secularization movement has contributed to an erosion of sacredness of death. Despite Church encouragement for the body to be present at the Funeral Mass, the growth of cremation as a means of disposition has resulted in fewer bodies being present at ritual services. According to Dr. Wolfelt, the body is the key symbol of death.<sup>90</sup> He states it is an important part of helping the family deal with the reality of the death of a loved one so that the process of healing can commence. The *Order of Christian Funerals*<sup>91</sup> emphasizes the body being present at the Funeral Mass for this very reason, it represents how Christ died and expresses Catholic belief that the body is a temple of the Holy Spirit. Since the Second Vatican Council, rediscovery of the Church’s primary

---

<sup>87</sup> Celebration of Life is a common term used for a social gathering at a funeral home, golf course, restaurant or public gathering space usually featuring speeches about a deceased person’s life, their contributions, career and family life. Participants are often welcomed to contribute pictures, comments and anecdotes about the person’s life.

<sup>88</sup> Dr. Alan Wolfelt. Comment made at Study Week conference in the Archdiocese of Vancouver to an audience of priests. 2017.

<sup>89</sup> Based on interviews with leaders at two major family independent funeral homes in Metro Vancouver. December 2020.

<sup>90</sup> Dr. Alan Wolfelt. Presented verbally at a bereavement workshop November 2017 and cited in the organization web site. <https://www.centerforloss.com/2016/12/funeral-ritual-important/>

<sup>91</sup> *Order of Christian Funerals*. Ottawa: Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2016.

symbols for funerals and burial has advanced funeral rites as opportunities for instruction and comfort. The Church has a full history in providing for the family in the best possible way. Over the centuries She has adapted practices to accommodate to unique circumstances. The Church has maintained her insistent instruction for bodies of the deceased to be buried in cemeteries or other sacred places with burial being the most fitting way to express faith and hope in the resurrection of the body. This upholds the relationship between the living and dead and opposes tendencies to minimize burial to a private sphere. She acknowledges the trends toward cremation has almost become unstoppable. With cremation has come widespread confusion, not just about what the Church teaches on burial and cremation, but more fundamentally about the resurrection of the body itself. Scott Hahn, theologian and author indicates:

Cremation teaches people lessons about the body that are directly contrary to what the Church actually believes. It teaches the body is disposable. It teaches that the body is not an integral part of the human person. And it teaches that the body has no value once the soul is gone – that body has run its course, and there will be nothing more of it. No resurrection, No transformation. No glorification. Cremation communicates one truth about the body. Burial communicates another. And which truth we believe has implications not just for our death, but for our life.<sup>92</sup>

Hahn points out that to the early Christians, burial was peaceful. “It was laying the body to rest until it could be reunited with its soul. Cremation, on the other hand, was violent; it was swiftly, forcefully, and utterly destroying a body in which the Body of Christ had dwelt.”<sup>93</sup> For centuries burial was constant, albeit the Church showed adaptability in adjusting customs and in developing funeral rites. Modernism, science and sanitation

---

<sup>92</sup> Hahn, Scott. *Hope to Die: The Christian Meaning of Death and the Resurrection of the Body*. Steubenville: Emmaus Road Publishing, 2020. 154.

<sup>93</sup> Hahn. *Hope to Die*. 125.

concerns played a part in the rapid rise of cremation in the last 70 years with the Catholic Church permitting cremation after the Second Vatican Council.

Although there is a trend towards de-ritualization, there is a cultural fascination with death as seen in the growth of death cafés, death doulas,<sup>94</sup> themes of death in entertainment, and interests in ancestry.com and legacy.com. Although reduced ritualization is a general trend, it is partially offset by this curiosity around death. The return to ritual by a non-practising Catholic is part of a family's quest for meaning, sometimes in part, out of respect for the wishes for the person who died or recognition of the value of the ritual. Catholic sociologist and priest Andrew Greeley explains "Catholics remain Catholic because of Catholic religious sensibility, metaphors that explain what human life means, with deep and powerful appeal to the total person...Catholics like their heritage because it has great stories."<sup>95</sup> As a critic of the Church and as one who has been heavily criticized, this insight offers some explanation for Catholics returning to a parish for a funeral.

Until one is triggered to look at death (attending a funeral, contemplating death due to serious illness, a visit to the hospital, death of a celebrity, etc.) it can be observed we have a trivial relationship with death that can result in the reduction of or outright abandonment of important rituals. Our fear and avoidance of it leaves us ignorant of death as a natural part of one's human experience, a reality true to all human beings.

---

<sup>94</sup> A death café is a gathering, usually in small groups and lead by a facilitator, to talk about death and issues related to dying. Death doulas are often compared to midwives and intermediaries between funeral home and cemetery professionals to help the family navigate the decisions and process of coming to terms with death. A community college in Metro Vancouver, Douglas College, offers a course on the topic. In Canada there is now an association called "The End-of-Life Doula Association."

<sup>95</sup> Andrew Greeley. *Why do Catholics Stay in the Church?* The New York Times. 1994. Cited in Canada's Catholics by Reginald Bibby and Angus Reid. 2016. Novalis.

The Catholic community is not immune to changes in society. It watches the same movies and shows as everyone else. Catholics, too, are engrained in the culture and practice of sourcing of information from social media and other sources. Unfortunately, the Church's voice has less impact and is often relativized. The beliefs of the culture have impacted even the most reverent and practising members of the community.

While Catholic traditions such as the funeral Mass offer healing and hope in the resurrection, many try and skip this ritual and opt for "cremate now, celebrate later"<sup>96</sup> as an option. As a faith community, the Church in North America needs to do a better job explaining the beauty and healing that comes from the rituals and traditions offered.<sup>97</sup>

Beyond the scope of this thesis but worth noting is the broader acceptance of euthanasia and assisted suicide in society. Theologians argue that assisted suicide and euthanasia are the ultimate denial of death. Pope John Paul II's *Evangelium Vitae* Article 64<sup>98</sup> provides some valuable insight:

At the end of life's spectrum, men and women find themselves facing the mystery of death. Today with advances in medicine the experience of dying is marked by new features. The prevailing tendency is to value life only to the extent that it brings pleasure and well-being. Suffering seems like an unbearable setback, something from which one must be freed at all costs. Dying is considered "senseless" if it suddenly interrupts a life still open to a future of new and interesting experiences. But it becomes a "rightful liberation" once life is held to no longer be meaningful because it is filled with pain and inexorably doomed to even greater suffering. Furthermore, when someone denies or neglects their fundamental relationship to God, man thinks he is his own rule and measure, with

---

<sup>96</sup> This term was stated by the President of a large family-owned funeral services organization in the summer of 2019. It captures the prevailing trend in the society. The BC Funeral Association reports that the cremation rate in British Columbia is amongst the highest in North America, due in part to high land prices and lack of cemetery space.

<sup>97</sup> Of interest, at Catholic Cemeteries Vancouver we had a gentleman who insisted on shovelling dirt into his wife's grave after the final interment prayers. His request was supported, and he was so grateful to have direct involvement and "feeling" he was doing something for his wife. For many, direct tactile involvement gets them back to our roots of caring for the dead.

the right to demand that society guarantee him the ways and means to decide what to do with his life in full and complete autonomy.<sup>99</sup>

This article reflects the culture's distancing from God and the belief that only God can take life.

Another topic area worth noting but beyond the scope of the thesis is the decline in the tradition of speaking of the *Four Last Things* – death, judgment, heaven and hell. Pope Benedict said that the greatest difficulty in the Church over the past four decades is the loss of a sense of eschatology. Author Father Peter Stravinskis observed “we are all the poorer for it.”<sup>100</sup>

### **The Acceptance of Death and Spiritual Growth in Catholic Tradition**

The evening before the feast day of Saint Francis of Assisi, Franciscans around the world celebrate “transitus,” or the “passing” of Saint Francis. During this memorial observed for centuries, celebrants note how Saint Francis called out “welcome, sister death.”<sup>101</sup> This phrase has become a common one in Catholic tradition today, death is something to be welcomed and not avoided with dread. Building on the tradition passed on from Saint Francis and many saints, modern Catholics can learn from those who died during this post-modern age, by witnessing the beauty the Catholic faith offers. There is a long history of books on dying well in the Catholic spiritual tradition. Many of the more contemporary authors (Bernardin, Groeschel) are much more likely to include medical

---

<sup>99</sup> *Evangelium Vitae, on the Value and Inviolability of Human Life*. 1995. John Paul II. Retrieved March 21, 2021, from [http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_enc\\_25031995\\_evangelium-vitae.html](http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_25031995_evangelium-vitae.html) Article 64.

<sup>100</sup> Homily by the Reverend Peter M. J. Stravinskis, *Focusing on the Last Four Things*. November 12, 2017. The Catholic World Report. Sourced from: <https://www.catholicworldreport.com/2017/11/12/focusing-again-on-the-four-last-things/>

<sup>101</sup> Greg Friedman. *Reflecting on Death with Francis of Assisi*. September 29, 2018. Sourced from: <https://www.franciscanmedia.org/franciscan-spirit-blog/reflecting-on-death-with-francis-of-assisi>

experiences, hospital reflections and wrote during the experience of terminal illness.

They also include more attention to social and psychological concerns than in the past.

Cardinal Joseph Bernardin, Archbishop of Cincinnati, and later Chicago was famous for his promotion of the Church's social teachings and wrote of his own experience of terminal illness and approaching death. Like others before him he affirmed that we could view death as an enemy or as a friend:

If we see it (death) as an enemy, death causes anxiety and fear. We tend to go into a state of denial. But if we see it as a friend, our attitude is truly different. As a person of faith, I see death as a friend, as the transition from earthly life to eternal life.<sup>102</sup>

Bernardin saw his preparation for death as a *last pastoral act*: “The most important thing I could do for the people of the Archdiocese – and everyone of good will – would be the way I prepare for death.”<sup>103</sup> Bernardin came to think of death as a friend through the influence of Henri Nouwen who had visited the cardinal after cancer surgery. Henri Nouwen, Catholic priest, professor, trained psychologist and writer wrote in his meditation on dying and caring:

To befriend death, we must claim that we are children of God, sisters and brothers of all people, and parents of generations yet to come. In so doing, we liberate our death from its absurdity and make it the gateway to a new life....we can choose to befriend our death as Jesus did. We can choose to live as God's beloved children in solidarity with all people, trusting in our ultimate fruitfulness. And in so doing, we can also become people who care for others. As men and women who have faced our mortality, we can help our brothers and sisters to dispel the darkness of death and guide them toward the light of God's grace.<sup>104</sup>

Nouwen taught others to befriend death as a lifelong spiritual task which deeply affects relationships with others. Death does not have a sting but is something to befriend

---

<sup>102</sup> Quoted in White et al. *The Final Journey of Joseph Cardinal Bernardin*, 13. Press conference 30 August 1996.

<sup>103</sup> Walters, Kerry. *The Art of Dying and Living, Lessons from Saints of Our Time*. Maryknoll, NY. Orbis Books. 2011. Reference to Bernardin's press conferences and book, the Gift of Peace, 3,6. 42.

<sup>104</sup> Henri Nouwen. *Our Greatest Gift, A Meditation on Dying and Caring*. New York, NY. Harper One. 1994. 45.

and for us to help others befriend. Living and caring are one. Nouwen shares the example of Mary's standing under the cross as an expression of care of the dying. She helped Jesus recall his words: "The time will come when you leave me alone, yet I am not alone, because the Father is with me." John 16:32. Nouwen states: "Celebrating freely both our living and our dying can only happen when we set aside our fears and reach out in love – not only to one another but also to our God." Nouwen advises to face death before being in any real danger of dying and to reflect on mortality before conscious and unconscious energy is directed to the struggle to survive.<sup>105</sup> Many in the community face their death and prepare for it spiritually and practically well in advance of physical decline or critical illness. This is a position that can help the community to liberate some of the natural fear that comes with contemplating one's mortality.

Eight centuries earlier Saint Bernard of Clairvaux described the death of a just man not as "terrifying," but as "consoling":

His death is good, because it ends his miseries; it is better still, because he begins a new life; it is excellent, because it places him in sweet security. From his bed of mourning, whereon he leaves a precious load of virtues, he goes to take possession of the true land of the living. Jesus acknowledges him as His brother and as His friend, for he has died to the world before closing his eyes from its dazzling light. Such is the death of the saints, a death very precious in the sign of God.<sup>106</sup>

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* teaches us that Christ comes to meet us and lead us into eternal life:

In view of Jesus' suffering and death, death itself can become easier. In an act of trust and love for the Father, we can say yes, as Jesus did in the Garden of

---

<sup>105</sup> Michelle O'Rourke. *Befriending Death: Henri Nouwen and a Spirituality of Dying*. Maryknoll, NY. Orbis Books. 2009. 97.

<sup>106</sup> Scott Hahn. *Hope to Die: The Christian Meaning of Death and the Resurrection of the Body*. Steubenville, OH. Emmaus Road Publishing. 2020. 115. Quoted in *Half Hours with the Saints and Servants of God*.



Gethsemani. Such an attitude is called spiritual sacrifice: the dying person unites himself with Christ's sacrifice on the Cross.<sup>107</sup>

The Christian outlook on death diminishes and eliminates anxiety because it proposes that death is to be seen as a passage to new life. We are reminded of Christ's anxiety around death during His passion (His "agony in the garden") but more importantly of His ultimate trust in God's will and love. God's love is omnipresent and as participants in Christ's Passion, death, and resurrection, Christians are in relationship with the loving Lord now and into the future. Father Groeschel recommends contemplating our own reactions to death and to the mysterious reality that transcends it. For the believer, the promise of eternal life is the greatest of all hopes. Groeschel explains that life after death and the promise of eternal life should fill mankind with awe.<sup>108</sup> Like Jesus in the Garden and on the Cross, we can accept the reality of death to live in hope for eternal life.

---

<sup>107</sup> Youth Catechism of the Catholic Church. 155.

<sup>108</sup> Benedict J. Groeschel. *After This Life, What Catholics Believe About What Happens Next*. Huntington: Our Sunday Visitor Publishing, 2009. 85.

### Chapter 3 Jesus Christ and the Catholic Virtue of Hope Changes Everything

A professional caregiving organization called *Hope Grows* offering respite, professional caregiving and counselling services to citizens in the city of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania provides a good secular definition of hope. They propose the idea that hope links the past to the present and to the future and insist that hope requires planning, motivation, and determination. “To have hope is to want an outcome that makes your life better in some way. Hope helps us define what we want in our futures.”<sup>109</sup> Aging, illness, accidents and other factors such as the Covid-19 pandemic increase our mortality awareness. For the believer Jesus Christ is our hope.

Religious faith joined with hope helps one address the topic of death comprehensively and personally. Hope is a magnet to enter the mysteries of death and eternal life. To have hope for the future there must be an appreciation for the past with memories and linkages to those who have gone before us; they bear witness to the teachings shared by the Church through her rituals. These rituals help to experience the life of Christ as the source of our hope. Many of these experiences are further anchored in the symbol and practices of the Catholic cemetery.

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* defines hope in this way:

The theological virtue by which we desire the kingdom of heaven and eternal life as our happiness, placing our trust in Christ’s promise and relying not on our own strength, but on the help of the grace of the Holy Spirit.<sup>110</sup>

---

<sup>109</sup> As reviewed on 14 January 2021. <https://hopegrows.net/>

<sup>110</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. 1817.

The virtue of hope responds to the aspiration of happiness which God has placed in the heart of every person...and inspires acts and purifies them to order them to the kingdom of heaven. This keeps mankind from discouragement and opens our hearts to the expectation of eternal beatitude.<sup>111</sup>

Father Romanus Cessario, a classical Thomistic theologian, states: “Christ remains the source of all moral goodness for the person who accepts the message of the Gospel.”<sup>112</sup> He writes of four features of hope:

1. Hope concerns only the movement toward what perfects the human person.
2. Hope looks toward the future. Hope seeks a good object that still lies in the future.
3. We speak about hope only in the **attainment of the good**, when it involves some difficulty or element of arduousness.
4. Only something that is attainable elicits hope. A person must judge that the hoped-for-reality lies within the realm of possible options.<sup>113</sup>

Importantly Cessario explains that as a theological virtue, hope’s special function is to unite the believer with God as his or her supreme and ultimate good. Citing St. Thomas Aquinas, Cessario indicates God alone constitutes the supreme good for the human person and that a personal relationship with God which we call beatitude is indeed the supreme happiness.

Our hope and our heaven is a person, Jesus Christ, as Pope Benedict XVI repeatedly taught:

No one has ever ascended into heaven except with one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man, who is in heaven... For he is our head, and we are His body. No one ascended into heaven except Christ because we also are Christ: he is the Son of Man by his union with us, and we by our union with him are sons of God.<sup>114</sup>

---

<sup>111</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. 2184. 1818.

<sup>112</sup> Cessario, Romanus. *The Virtues, Or the Unexamined Life*. New York: Continuum International Publishing, 2002. 6.

<sup>113</sup> Romanus Cessario. *The Virtues, Or the Unexamined Life*. New York: Continuum International Publishing, 2002. 33-52.

<sup>114</sup> Pope Benedict XVI. *The Truth will Set you Free*. 13 May 2010 blog. Sourced 25 April 2021.from: <https://actingpersonblog.wordpress.com/2010/05/13/ratzinger-benedict-xvi-ascension/>

Pope Benedict explains that heaven means that man now has a place in God with an interpenetration of humanity and divinity in Christ, the man who is in God and eternally one with God. The Ascension and the Resurrection gave the disciples certainty that the crucified Jesus was alive and had overcome death with the door to eternal life henceforth forever open.<sup>115</sup>

The Second Vatican Council's *Gaudium et Spes*<sup>116</sup> acknowledges the legitimacy of a twofold source for moral truth: the explicit revelation of Christ, and the created structures of human reality that the Christian tradition calls natural law. The Christian thinker can think about the "being of things" from both these standpoints. Hope shares the general dynamics of human longing, part of the psychological makeup of the human person.

The three theological virtues: faith, hope and charity inform all moral virtues and give life to them. These virtues dispose Christians to live in a relationship with the Holy Trinity...with God for their origin, their motive, and their object.<sup>117</sup>

Theologian Peter Kreeft sees humans as creatures of time constantly moving into the future with eyes facing forward with hope as the *headlights*. Kreeft believes hope is the forgotten virtue of modern time. Real hope, the theological virtue of hope, distinct from the vague sentiment of hopefulness or optimism, is something offensively supernatural to the modern mind. Kreeft quips: "Minds that dare not raise its eyes to the

---

<sup>115</sup> Benedict XVI. *The Truth will Set you Free*

<sup>116</sup> *Gaudium et Spes*, on the Church in the Modern World. Pastoral Constitution. 1965. Retrieved March 21, 2021, from [https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_const\\_19651207\\_gaudium-et-spes\\_en.html](https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html)

<sup>117</sup> William Mattison. *Introducing Moral Theology True Happiness and the Virtues*. 25-27.

sky.”<sup>118</sup> The virtue of hope serves as a reminder that our citizenship is not of this world. Modernism has trivialized hope, but Christian hope is not a wish or a feeling but a rock-solid certainty. The rock, Kreeft indicates, is Christ.<sup>119</sup> Paul’s Letter to the Romans captures how hope must shape Christian life:

Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand, and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God. And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us. Rom 5:1-5.<sup>120</sup>

Author and professor, William C. Mattison III sees God as the proper object of hope, a hope that concerns society’s ultimate destiny.<sup>121</sup> Belief (faith) and yearning for union (hope) with God are key components of a good life on earth properly orienting individuals toward their final destiny. Humans have a natural longing for completion and fulfillment. Mattison III states: “If one lives in earthly life in union with God that union continues in the afterlife. The opposite is said to be true, a soul’s estrangement from God leads to loss of purpose, and loss of union to God.”<sup>122</sup> Josef Pieper wrote in his treatise on hope, an alternative definition of hope:

Hope, life, love, is one of the very simple, primordial dispositions of the living person. In hope, man reaches ‘with restless heart,’ with confidence and patient expectation toward...the arduous ‘not yet’ of fulfillment, whether natural or supernatural.<sup>123</sup>

---

<sup>118</sup> Peter Kreeft. *Hope. Fundamentals of the Faith*. San Francisco: 1998. 176-180. Sourced 3 March 2021 from <https://www.catholiceducation.org/en/religion-and-philosophy/apologetics/hope.html>

<sup>119</sup> Peter Kreeft. *Hope. Fundamentals of the Faith*.

<sup>120</sup> Holy Bible. The New Revised Standard Version. Catholic Bible Press. Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1993.

<sup>121</sup> Mattison. *Introducing Moral Theology True Happiness and the Virtues*. 251.

<sup>122</sup> Mattison. *Introducing Moral Theology True Happiness and the Virtues*. 258-9.

<sup>123</sup> Josef Pieper. *Hope*, trans. Mary Frances McCarthy, S.N.D. (San Francisco CA. 1986.) 27.

The *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Catholic Church* highlights the theological virtues as *faith that saves, hope that enlightens, charity that loves*.<sup>124</sup>

Theologian and author Father James T. O'Connor points out that the life of a good Christian is *Holy Desire*. The believer may ask: "How does desire become hope?" O'Connor points to a comment from St. Augustine. "What you desire you do not yet see: but by desiring you are made capacious so that when it comes you may be filled up with what you see."

God enlarges our desire.  
Enlarging our desire, He enlarges our soul.  
Enlarging our soul, He enlarges our capacity.  
Such is our life, that we may be exercised through desiring.<sup>125</sup>

Desire for an everlasting future is ineffective unless accompanied by hope with the conviction that something more, something better can be attained. There is hope in what O'Connor calls the divine exchange. He refers to a sermon made by St. Augustine, introducing the mutual sharing Christ affected: "Ours to give Him the ability to die; His to give us the ability to live."<sup>126</sup>

Christ's death gives meaning to life, not because death is good but because He overcame it by His resurrection.<sup>127</sup> O'Connor provides an interpretation of Psalm 27 by Cassiodorus, a Roman statesman, scholar, monastery founder, educator in the 6<sup>th</sup> century:

I believe that I shall see the bounty of the Lord in the land of the living. Wait for the Lord. The Psalmist promises himself that he shall see the bounty of the Lord in the land of the living, that is, in the future life where the good things are everlasting. And that land is correctly said to be the land of the living because this is the land of the dying. It is this **land of the living that will arouse our hopes**

---

<sup>124</sup> *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*. 12.

<sup>125</sup> James T. O'Connor. *Land of the Living*. New York: Catholic Book Publishing Co., 1992. 49.

<sup>126</sup> James T. O'Connor. Citing Augustine, "Sermon on the Passion," *Buelferbytanus* 3: PLS 2, 546. In *Land of the Living*. 87.

<sup>127</sup> James T. O'Connor. *Land of the Living*. 97.

**and stimulate our desires. It must serve as a magnet that attracts both us and our world to what God plans** to be their future.<sup>128</sup> [emphasis added]

## Jesus Christ Transforms Death for Believers

The meaning of Christ's death and resurrection can lessen death anxiety as we find deeper meaning and hope in Christ's resurrection. To do so, Christians are invited to enter into the life of the Trinity to experience the relationship Christ had with the Father. Luigi Giussani urges a rediscovery of this true religious sense.<sup>129</sup>

The vision the Church gives of death is one of hope where physical death has lost its power through Christ, the One who opens eternal life to all. Pope Benedict XVI states "from the cross, new life comes to us. On the cross Jesus becomes the source of life for himself and for all. On the cross, death was conquered."<sup>130</sup> Von Balthasar considered Christ's death an important aspect that God could not become man in any other way than by coming to know human fear and taking it upon himself. St. Paul teaches through baptism and challenges to become alive to God in Jesus Christ:

Do you now know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.... The death he died he died to sin, once and for all, but the life he lives he lives to God. So, you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Jesus Christ.  
Romans 6:3-11

In Jesus Christ lies mankind's, experience, and model to join God the Father.

I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life. John 14:6

---

<sup>128</sup> James T. O'Connor. *Land of the Living*. 50 Cassiodorus, *Expositio in Psalterium*: In Ps 26: Pl 70, 192.

<sup>129</sup> Luigi Giussani. *At the Origins of the Christian Claim*. Montreal, Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1998.

<sup>130</sup> Joseph Ratzinger, Pope Benedict XVI. *Jesus of Nazareth*.

Death anxiety was taken on by Christ for humanity. This taking on of anxiety is a truth that applies to modern death anxiety. Christianity is always the proclamation of the God who became man. Theologian Scott Hahn states that the coming of Christ is God's direct intervention in human history, not only being a historical event but a miracle. Jesus came back to life never to die again. The resurrection is the divinization of his humanity, the temporal entering into the eternal which opens the door for our own resurrection, our own transfiguration and glorification.<sup>131</sup>

We can also turn to how society upheld the figure of a saint as an exemplary image of the human person; and one who has realized the unity between self and destiny.<sup>132</sup> Believers can learn from the experiences of Saint Francis of Assisi in his poem *The Canticle of the Sun*. With great Christian understanding he praises God for the existence of "Sister Bodily Death":

Be thou praised, O Lord, for our Sister Bodily Death,  
From whom no man living may escape.  
Woe to those who die in mortal sin.  
Blessed are they who shall be found doing Thy most Holy Will,  
For the second dying shall work them no evil.<sup>133</sup>

Jesus Christ in his death manifests his great humility and his unity and intimate relationship to God the Father.

Father, into your hands I commend my spirit.  
and when he had said this, he breathed his last. Luke 23:46<sup>134</sup>

---

<sup>131</sup> Hahn. *Hope to Die*. 67-68.

<sup>132</sup> Luigi Giussani. *Religious Awareness in Modern Man*. Communio International Catholic Review. Washington, DC. 1998.

<sup>133</sup> Saint Francis of Assisi. *The Hymn of the Sun*. Thinebeck, NY. Broken Glass/ Lancaster Productions, 1990. Page.24. As cited in *After this Life*. Page.15.

<sup>134</sup> Holy Bible. The New Revised Standard Version. Luke 23:46



In *Evangelium Vitae*, Pope John Paul II cites this passage summarizing Christ's mission: "I came that they may have life and have it abundantly." Jn 10:10. He is referring to that "new" and "eternal" life which consists in communion with the Father, to which every person is freely called in the Son by the power of the Sanctifying Spirit. It is precisely in this "life" that all the aspects and stages of human life achieve their full significance.<sup>135</sup>

Man is called to a fullness of life which far exceeds the dimensions of his earthly existence, because it consists in sharing the very life of God. The loftiness of this supernatural vocation reveals the greatness and the inestimable value of human life even in its temporal phase. At the same time, it is precisely this supernatural calling which highlights the relative character of an individual's earthly life.

The Church knows that this gospel of life, which she has received from her Lord, has a profound and persuasive echo in the heart of every person -- believer and non-believer alike -- because it fulfils all the heart's expectations while infinitely surpassing them.

Even in difficulties and uncertainties, every person sincerely open to truth and goodness can, by the light of reason and the hidden action of grace, come to recognize in the natural law written in the heart. (cf. Rom 2:14-15).

An underlying task of the Church is to help the community understand Christ's resurrection to inspire trust in it and overcome fear. The Catechism teaches:

We believe in the resurrection of the dead  
because Christ rose from the dead,  
lives forever,  
and causes us to share in this eternal life.<sup>136</sup>

---

<sup>135</sup> *Evangelium Vitae, on the Value and Inviolability of Human Life.*

<sup>136</sup> Youth Catechism of the Catholic Church. Paragraph 15 (CCC 988-991).

Life after death is an immediately attractive proposition, or it would be if not for the era of mistrust and doubt in which we live. A Barna Group study in 2010 asked American adults the meaning of Easter. Over two-thirds of Christians polled did not connect it to the resurrection and its meaning.<sup>137</sup> Pope Benedict XVII invites Christians back to the Christ of Faith from the movement of the Christ of History. “Jesus Christ chooses to come to mankind only through the faith of the disciples to whom he reveals himself; that he continues to knock gently at the doors of our hearts and slowly opens our eyes if we open our doors to him.”<sup>138</sup> The early Christians did not fear death, they welcomed death. Writing in the early fourth century, St. Athanasius remarked: “Everyone is by nature is afraid of death and of bodily dissolution; the marvel of marvels, is that he who is enfolded in the faith of the cross despises this natural fear and for the sake of the cross is no longer cowardly in the face of it.” Jesus’ presence chased away early Christians’ fear of death. Athanasius explains:

Before the divine sojourn of the Savior, even the holiest of men were afraid of death, and mourned the dead as those who perish. But now that the Savior has raised His body, death is no longer terrible, but all those who believe in Christ tread it underfoot as nothing and prefer to die rather than to deny their faith in Christ, knowing full well that when they die, they do not perish, but live indeed and become incorruptible through the resurrection.<sup>139</sup>

Over the millennia society has displayed concern for the dead and life after death. Funerals continue to be ritualistic. The vision of the Church gives of death is one where

---

<sup>137</sup> Barna Group. Easter Meaning Study 2010. Sourced 16 June, 2018 on the Internet. <https://www.barna.com/research/most-americans-consider-easter-a-religious-holiday-but-fewer-correctly-identify-its-meaning/>

<sup>138</sup> Joseph Ratzinger, Pope Benedict XVI. *Jesus of Nazareth. Vol. II: Holy Week, from the Entrance into Jerusalem to the Resurrection.* 276. 277.

<sup>139</sup> Scott Hahn. *Hope to Die: The Christian Meaning of Death and the Resurrection of the Body.* Steubenville: Emmaus Road Publishing, 2020. Athanasius, On the Incarnation, 57-58.

fear is replaced by hope. Father Benedict Groeschel encourages a fear of sin, not death and counsels that death has become an element of God's great work of redemption. Groeschel encourages asking, "what happens next?" He teaches: "**what we believe happens next is very much going to define what is happening to us right now.**" He is speaking of adopting an attitude of anticipation and hope and guides coupling the topic of death with the hope of the resurrection. T.S. Elliot wrote, "In my end is my beginning." This phrase succinctly captures mankind's destiny. To face death by accepting it as part of life makes fear subside. Deeper insights into the resurrection provide food for hope. The resurrection provides ample evidence and inspiration to engage in the faith and to begin to trust in the resurrection and its meaning for eternal life.

Groeschel teaches that death, without the possibility of eternal life, is an irrevocable end. Considered alone, death is sorrow. He counsels the importance to contemplate personal reactions to death and the great mysteries that transcends it. He states: "For the believer, the promise of eternal life is the greatest of all hopes which endows our earthly life."<sup>140</sup>

Von Balthasar encourages humanity not to be spiritually lazy and to be courageous. He encourages Christians to not allow themselves to be infected by modern humanity's neurotic anxiety. If humanity can remove sin-anxiety, the Cross opens something different – grace. Grace is certainly more attractive than anxiety.<sup>141</sup> The *Catechism* teaches that grace is a gift of the Spirit who justifies and sanctifies and includes the gifts to associate with the salvific work on the Body of Christ, the Church.<sup>142</sup>

---

<sup>140</sup> Groeschel. *After this Life*. 85-86.

<sup>141</sup> von Balthasar. *The Christian and Anxiety*. 88-89.

<sup>142</sup> Catechism of the Catholic Church. 2003.

If man engages in having an encounter with Jesus and participating in his life with an open heart and humility, he is opening himself to his destiny – life with our loving God. Having a greater sense of purpose is mankind’s challenge. God longs for each person to discover the life He created for each person to live – here on earth and forever in eternity.

He who lives in me, though he dies, yet shall he live, and whoever lives and believes in me shall never die. Because I live, you also live. John 11:25-26<sup>143</sup>

Directing one’s life towards Jesus Christ with attachment to God is proven to provide benefits, a finding that supports Church propositions. Author and professor John Hyun Jung wrote a journal article entitled *Attachment to God and Death Anxiety in Later Life: Does Race Matter?* Empirical evidence confirms that a secure attachment to God has been linked to higher levels of self-esteem and optimism in later life (Bradshaw & Kent, 2018). Jung too determined that a secure attachment to God is also associated with a decrease in death anxiety. This attachment to God is defined as a set of divine beliefs that views God as the “ultimate attachment figure” who is loving, caring and supportive (Kirkpatrick, 2004). Jung goes on to cite studies where people become more religious as they get older (Krause, 2008) and are inclined to establish a bond to a compensatory attachment figure (e.g., God) to fulfill their attachment needs (Granqvist & Hagefull, 2000).<sup>144</sup>

## Hope in the Time of Sickness and Dying

The following sections illustrate how the Church communicates the healing hope of Jesus Christ to the living, the dying and their families through sacraments, liturgy and

---

<sup>143</sup> Holy Bible. The New Revised Standard Version. Catholic Bible Press. Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1993. John 11:25-26.

<sup>144</sup> John Hyun Jung. *Attachment to God and Death Anxiety in Later Life: Does Race Matter?* Research on Aging. 40(10): 956-977.

funeral practices. The chapter *Care at the End of Life* from the *Catholic Health Ethics Guide* published by the Catholic Health Alliance of Canada provides a fitting overview of the human experience:

Sickness, suffering and dying are an inevitable part of human experience and are a reminder of the limits of human existence. Rooted in charity, Catholic health and social services are called to respect the dignity of persons, to foster trust and to promote justice.... In the face of death, the Church witnesses to her belief that God has created each person for eternal life. Suffering and death are not an end but rather a passage transformed by the promise of the resurrection.<sup>145</sup>

The guide was written to firmly ground the Gospel message in the parable of the Good Samaritan – a model of how to respond to one’s neighbour in need. Jesus points to the new life of the kingdom: the total and permanent healing of the human person in all dimensions and relationships.<sup>146</sup>

As the guide points to health care workers’ participation in the healing ministry of Jesus Christ, by extension this participation extends to those serving in Catholic cemeteries. The guide indicates healing occurs best when people experience belonging to *communities of compassion*. Christians live in a community of faith shaped by their baptismal call to share God’s life and to work for the common good of all peoples based on fundamental laws such as love of God, love of neighbour.<sup>147</sup> Spiritual and religious care are recognized as essential elements of care for those facing death.

---

<sup>145</sup> Catholic Health Alliance of Canada. *Health Ethics Guide, Third Edition*. Ottawa ON: Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2012. 55.

<sup>146</sup> Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops, *New Hope in Christ: A Pastoral Message on Sickness and Healing*, 1983, pg. 10, n 11. Noted on page 1 of the Health Ethics Guide.

<sup>147</sup> *Health Ethics Guide*. 19.

Some beautiful insights can be noted from *Samaritanus Bonus*, an instruction published in July 2020 from the offices of the *Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith*, on the care of persons in critical and terminal phases of life:

Hope imparts meaning to the time of sickness and death. From this hope springs the love that overcomes the temptation to despair. The Christian must help the dying to break free from despair and to place their hope in God.<sup>148</sup>

*Samaritanus Bonus* states it is the mission of all who meet the sick at critical and terminal stages to care for one's neighbour. Christ invites humanity to trust in His invisible grace that prompts us to the generosity of supernatural charity.

As a result of faith, death can become an occasion of greater hope. Pain is existentially bearable only where there is hope. The hope that Christ communicates to the sick and the suffering is that of his presence and true nearness. Hope is not only the expectation of a greater good but is a gaze on a present full of significance.... The resurrection not only reveals eternal life, but it makes manifest that in history the last word never belongs to death, pain, betrayal, and suffering.<sup>149</sup>

Society is encouraged to share human warmth and evangelical fraternity to reveal a positive horizon of support to the sick person or the surviving family making preparations and arrangements in hope and confident trust. Thus, each becomes a participant in opening their life to the horizon of life eternal and affirming the transcendent destiny of each person. Therefore too, the greatest misery consists in the loss of hope in the face of death.<sup>150</sup>

---

<sup>148</sup> *Samaritanus Bonus – on the care of persons in critical and terminal phases of life*. From the offices on the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. 14 July 2020.

<sup>149</sup> *Samaritanus Bonus*. 5.

<sup>150</sup> *Samaritanus Bonus*. 16.

## Hope and the Sacrament of Anointing the Sick

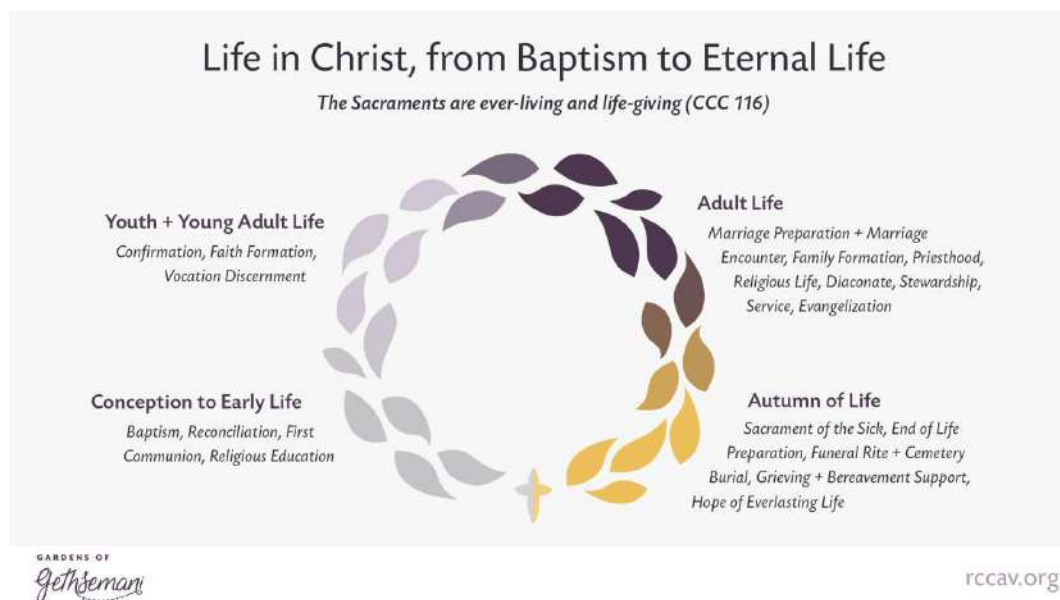


Figure 1. Sacramental Journey from Conception to Life's Natural End. Developed with the Archdiocese of Vancouver Office for Ministry & Outreach. 2014.

Figure 1 shows a slide prepared by the Archdiocese of Vancouver to provide an overview of the sacramental journey of a Catholic, illustrating the Church's presence from conception to our natural end (and beyond). The natural end message is a "soft entry" into talking about death, end-of-life ministry, Anointing and other healing sacraments as part of the Church's love and care for its members.

The association of healing sacraments to death care, particularly noted in the *Rite of Anointing of the Sick*, is an important part of the healing ministry of Jesus Christ and His Church. Joseph Martos articulates the purpose of Anointing very well:

To bring spiritual strength to those who are physically ill; reminding them they are loved and forgiven by God. The sacrament assists to remove obstacles and sin from the soul and to facilitate grace. Despite clear articulation on the special grace and effects of anointing, there are misunderstandings around its purpose and value.<sup>151</sup>

<sup>151</sup> Joseph Martos. *Doors to the Sacred: A Historical Introduction to Sacraments in the Catholic Church: Updated and Expanded with Charts and Glossary*. Liguori: Liguori Publications, 2014. 398.

Father John Kasza, PhD states unequivocally that Anointing is “one of the least understood of the sacraments and one that is still viewed as the ‘sacrament of the last resort.’”<sup>152</sup> What was a means of spiritual and even physical healing in the Middle Ages came to be seen as a last act prior to death. Distinctions developed during Vatican II instituted a change of name from “Extreme Unction,” associated with the last Rites, to “Anointing of the Sick.” Many in the Catholic community who were alive before the restoration of this name (and before the publication of the *Pastoral Care of the Sick* in 1972) have contributed to the confusion and misunderstandings of the sacrament today. Often any visit by a priest to a sick person is viewed only as preparation for death rather than a sacramental gift of life. These terms are generally misunderstood by non-Catholics in particular, drawing attention to the need for ongoing catechesis.

There is still a shadow of fear and misunderstanding in teaching on the Christian meaning of death.<sup>153</sup> Theologian German Martinez considers the mystery of death as part of the mystery of life, not as separate from it. He recognizes that death is something humans naturally rebel against and deny. However, he goes on, there is a vision of faith that can bring self-renewal and “turn back to our innermost centre of existence (where God is) and recognize within this God-given centre the seeds of eternity.”<sup>154</sup> Martinez explains, paradoxically, and through the eyes of faith, **the consummation of death contains the meaning of life.** Death through the passion of Christ signifies liberation, rest, passing over (*transitus*), encounter and transformation. Anointing as a sacrament

---

<sup>152</sup> John Kasza. *Oxford Handbook of Sacramental Theology*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015.

<sup>153</sup> Martos, Joseph. *Doors to the Sacred*. 394.

<sup>154</sup> German Martinez. *Signs of Freedom, Theology of Christian Sacraments*. Mahwah: Paulist Press, 2003. 236-237.



administered on its own or in combination with Reconciliation and the Eucharist helps to heal the injured soul for divine glory.<sup>155</sup>

The popular Twentieth-Century Thomist philosopher Josef Pieper wrote that Christians have lost the original significance of the term “pilgrim on earth,” the very foundation of being in the world for the Christian, the concept of *status viatoris* as meaning “one on the way” toward eternal happiness. Pieper teaches, *status viatoris* ends when man ceases to live in the body. And for this reason, man’s way is temporal. Man’s actual existential situation is hope, the proper virtue of “not yet.”<sup>156</sup>

Martos explains “The Anointing of the Sick... which had begun in the patristic era as a door to the sacred meaning of sickness, became in the modern church a door to the sacred meaning of death.”<sup>157</sup> Extreme Unction or *final Anointing* was intended to express the Christian meaning of death to ensure the transition from this life to the next with touches of hope (versus despair). In more recent centuries, the Sacrament was not perceived in that original way and was not seen as offering a chance of regaining strength.

*The General Introduction of the Roman Ritual of Pastoral Care of the Sick* states that when the Church cares for the sick, it serves Christ himself in the suffering members of the Mystical Body, following the example of Lord Jesus who “went about going good and healing all.” The Church shows this solicitude not only by visiting the sick but also by raising them up through the anointing and by nourishing them with the Eucharist during their illness and when they are in danger of death.<sup>158</sup> When administered well and

---

<sup>155</sup> Martinez. *Signs of Freedom*. 238.

<sup>156</sup> Josef Pieper. *Faith, Hope, Love*. San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2012. 92.

<sup>157</sup> Martos. *Doors to the Sacred*. 395.

<sup>158</sup> The Roman Ritual. *Pastoral Care of the Sick*. New Jersey. Catholic Book Publishing. 1983. 12.

received well, anointing provides comfort to the sick or dying person and to their family members as well.

### Hope and The Order of Christian Funerals

Rooted in the *Order of Christian Funerals*, the Catholic Church provides the richness of the funeral liturgy as a tool of hope. Priests are ministers of reconciliation and cemetery personnel too play an important role in the ministry of consolation (bereavement support, aftercare, and connecting people to parishes for extended and ongoing pastoral care). The Church also plays a role in instructing survivors as to the significance of the death of a fellow Christian.

In 2017, Father Richard Rutherford, theologian, provided an instructional presentation to a group of ceterians<sup>159</sup> called *What Makes Catholic Cemeteries and Funeral Service Catholic*.<sup>160</sup> A key point from his presentation is that Catholic sacraments, cemetery practices and Christian funerals are all *incarnational*. They relate to the incarnation of Jesus as man and express His divinity. Our cemeteries testify to the presence of Jesus in the experience and mysteries of death and eternal life for incarnate beings. In the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, article 989 states:

We firmly believe, and hence we hope that, just as Christ is truly risen from the dead and lives for ever, so after death the righteous will live for ever with the risen Christ and he will raise them up on the last day.<sup>161</sup>

---

<sup>159</sup> Cemetery is a term used to describe professionals working at Catholic Cemeteries.

<sup>160</sup> Richard Rutherford. *What Makes Catholic Burial and Funerals Catholic*. Presentation to the Catholic Cemeteries and Funeral Association of the West conference. January 2017.

<sup>161</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. 989.

The *Order of Christian Funerals* expresses, in symbolic ways, the death's meaning in the life of a Christian. The richness of the Catholic funeral liturgy is a proclamation of the faith and of the importance of the process of leave-taking:

A time between death and leave-taking (vigil and related rites).  
 A time of leave-taking (funeral liturgy).  
 A time after leave-taking (committal rites and bereavement support).<sup>162</sup>

Vatican II's *The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*: numbers 81 to 83 called for funeral rites to express more clearly the paschal character of Christian death and should correspond more closely to the circumstances and traditions found in various regions. That is the *raison d'être* for the new ritual.

In Father Rutherford's forward to a book by Stephen Wilbrecht, he notes that Catholics are baptised into death:

Although our mortal life between birth and death indeed comes to an end, baptismal life in relationship with God established through the paschal mystery of Christ, enlivened by the enduring gift of the Paraclete, and sustained through the ministry of the Church does not end. **We are baptised into Christ's death.**<sup>163</sup>

Thanatologist, psychologist and bereavement educator Dr. Alan Wolfelt explains the purpose of the funeral through key psychological steps, including reality, recall, support, expression, recall, and finally transcendence.<sup>164</sup> The *Catholic Order of Christian Funerals* in fact addresses both psychological and spiritual needs. The rituals provide consolation and meaning and help families start the process of healing:

In the face of death, the Church confidently proclaims that God has created each person for eternal life and that Jesus, the Son of God, by his death and resurrection, has broken the chains of sin and death. Christians celebrate the

---

<sup>162</sup> Rutherford. *What Makes Catholic Burial and Funerals Catholic*. January 2017.

<sup>163</sup> Stephen Wilbricht. *Baptismal Ecclesiology and the Order of Christian Funerals*. Chicago: Liturgical Training Publications, 2018. Forward Page 1 Rutherford.

<sup>164</sup> Alan Wolfelt. *Creating Meaningful Funeral Ceremonies: A Guide for Caregivers*. New York: Routledge, 1994.

funeral rites to offer worship, praise, and thanksgiving to God for the gift of life which has now been returned to God, the author of life and the hope of the just. The faithful are called to a ministry of consolation to those who have suffered. This consolation is rooted in faith in the saving death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ. The Church calls each member of Christ's Body – priest, deacon, lay person – to participate in the ministry of consolation: to care for the dying, to pray for the dead, to comfort those who mourn. “By giving instruction, priests can lead the community to a deeper appreciation of its role in the ministry of consolation and to a fuller understanding of the significance of the death of a fellow Christian.”<sup>165</sup>

Decisions made by the dying person (or healthy person for that matter) in advance are best because they are expressions of the faith, expressions of self-determination, choice, and preference; they assist the family when the need comes. This provides the dying person with a voice in what is arguably their last life-on-earth event.

Familiarity with Mass, frequent worship and orientation to liturgy over the course of the life of a Catholic all have a role in preparing family for the words and gestures that welcome the deceased and family to their church. The body is received, covered by a baptismal pall and escorted to the centre of the church; prayers and readings identify the deceased by name, shed light on the mystery of death, express the grief of the bereaved and offer the words and deeds of Jesus Christ to bring acceptance, understanding and hope to the family and friends. The Eucharistic liturgy is offered, lifting up the life of the deceased and the memories and prayers of all present, recalling that the death of Jesus was for the deceased, who claims His mercy, forgiveness and salvation. The prayers of the Church recognize the sins and faults of the individual and asks that the wounds of Christ heal the wounds of the soul. Music and eulogy express the individuality of the deceased, while placing the person within the universal salvific will of Christ. The

---

<sup>165</sup> *Order of Christian Funerals*. Ottawa: Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2016. Introduction.

formality of the ritual gives a context for the grief to expand to acceptance while tempering it in recognized forms so that a family has the sense of doing the right thing for the loved one. The presence of mourners provides support for the family, showing that the deceased's life had a larger significance, and an opportunity for all to have sorrow recognized, honoured and potentially alleviated by the religious rites.<sup>166</sup>

A challenge for the Church to overcome is the community's exposure to "Celebration of Life" services or skipping of religious services. Father John Horgan, former hospital chaplain and active member of the Catholic Cemeteries Advisory Board for the Archdiocese of Vancouver presented a contemporary view on all or parts of the funeral liturgy being skipped and some misunderstanding of the healing sacraments, when he stated: "If we do not educate our community on Christian end-of-life traditions and the significance of our rituals, they will attempt to create their own."<sup>167</sup> Therefore, it is important to provide instruction on the value and rich meaning of the Catholic Funeral Mass and sacred burial in advance. To be fully effective, personal instruction can not only occur in one-on-one pastoral care interviews but must be given to the broader community from the pulpit, and throughout Catholic education. Brochures, web site content, recorded video testimonies can help with catechesis. Because funerals are not fully understood and because areas such as symbols are not understood in our present age, even the most basic Christian symbols need to be explained for the sake of non-Christians and Catholics who have not been evangelized.

---

<sup>166</sup> Guidance provided by Father John Horgan in the thesis review process March 2021.

<sup>167</sup> Father John Horgan. Statement at the 19 June 2020 Catholic Cemeteries Advisory Board meeting. Vancouver, BC.

## Hope with *Ad resurgendum cum Christo* in Response to Cremation

The need to clarify our Christian hope can be noted from the Church's instruction *Ad resurgendum cum Christo*, published as a result of the rapid rise in cremation and the many non-Christian practices being commonly adopted by Catholics, such as urns remaining in the home or the scattering of cremated remains:

The burial of the faithful departed in cemeteries or other sacred places encourages family members and the whole Christian community to pray for and remember the dead, while at the same time observing veneration of martyrs and saints.

Through the practice of burying the dead in cemeteries, in churches or their environs, Christian tradition has upheld the relationship between the living and the dead and has opposed any tendency to minimise, or relegate to the purely private sphere, the event of death and the meaning it has for Christians.<sup>168</sup>

The instruction indicates that necessary measures must be taken to preserve the practice of reverently burying the faithful departed as new ideas contrary to the Church's faith have become widespread. Citing the conservation of ashes residing in domestic residences. The noted thanatologist Dr. Wolfelt, not himself a Catholic, once commented that urns at home do not complete the bereavement process and leave the wound unhealed.<sup>169</sup> The instruction underscores the importance of the cemetery as a place of hope and reverence. Article 5 cites the consequences on non-reverent disposition of cremated remains:

The reservation of the ashes of the departed in a sacred place ensures that they are not excluded from the prayers and remembrance of their family of the Christian community. It prevents the faithful departed from being forgotten, or their remains from being shown a lack of respect, which eventuality is possible, most especially once the immediately subsequent generation has too passed away. Also, it prevents any unfitting or superstitious practices.<sup>170</sup>

---

<sup>168</sup> *Ad resurgendum cum Christo*. Article 3.

<sup>169</sup> Dr. Alan Wolfelt. Comment during 2017 seminar on bereavement.

<sup>170</sup> *Ad resurgendum cum Christo*. Article 5.

Christian hope is best affirmed and strengthened by ensuring the faithful departed are remembered, shown respect, and prayed over by the community in a sacred space.

### **Theology of the Catholic Cemeteries Ministry with Sacred Burial**

The Catholic cemetery is a locus of theology in its practices and in how it is arranged and adorned to express the truth about death and the resurrection of the body.

The association representing member Catholic cemeteries in North America is called the *Catholic Cemetery Conference*. The organization's creed indicates its full alignment to the teaching and practices of the Catholic Church:

- We recognize the deep religious significance of the Corporal Work of Mercy involved in the burial of the dead and reverence for the deceased.
- We are committed to encouraging Catholic prayer and devotion for our deceased brothers and sisters, especially in our cemeteries.
- We will promote efforts to strengthen and enhance Catholic teachings that relate to death, burial and reverence for the faithful departed.
- We will proclaim through our words, work, and example the sacredness of the Human body, belief in the resurrection and the Christian virtue of hope.<sup>171</sup>

The *Catholic Cemetery Conference* published a guidelines booklet entitled *The Catholic Cemetery: A Vision for the Millennium* which speaks to the importance of the relationship of the Catholic cemetery with diocesan and pastoral leaders:

Catholic cemeteries comprise a vital component of pastoral ministry of a diocese under the coordination and oversight of the bishop. By virtue of this arrangement, the Catholic cemeterian has a key role, along with the pastors of parishes served by the cemetery and the diocesan administration. This relationship must be both dynamic and mutually supportive to be responsive to the needs of the Catholic Community.

---

<sup>171</sup> Cited on the Catholic Cemetery Conference web site at <https://catholiccemeteryconference.org/about/creed/> Date 31 January 2021.

Catholic cemeteries, whether diocesan or parish, are a ministry of the entire community of faith. Therefore, each Catholic cemetery is an integral part of the whole Church, sensitive to the needs of Catholic families and other institutions within the Church.<sup>172</sup>

Thus, a Catholic cemetery has a role to play in evangelization and catechesis. The cemetery is not just a graveyard or memorial garden but is a place where the living encounter their own spiritual life. Article 75 states:

The time of death of a loved one is a time when people reflect on their relationship with God. The Catholic cemetery can extend to these individuals an invitation to return to fuller participation.

The Catholic cemetery ministry also plays a role in delivering the corporeal and the spiritual works of mercy. Burying the dead is obvious to all. However, as a ministry it supports all spiritual works of mercy as well as diocesan functions.<sup>173</sup> A cemetery provides a safe and sacred place for interior work and other forms of healing to take place and the Catholic cemetery organization plays a role in education to the community.

### **A Catholic Cemetery can be Taught to be seen as a Symbol of Hope**

A Catholic cemetery is a place of sleep...a place of hope. This is referring to the rest of the body. Catholic faith does not believe the soul is asleep. With human illness, deterioration and pain, the beauty of the earthly locations bids us to lift our eyes to heaven, where the souls are alive and aware, already in union with God and in communion with the Saints. Through the prism of Christian hope, death is a passage. Theologian German Martinez explains that Christians created the terminology of *koimeterion* (*coemeterium*) meaning cemetery, a place of sleep, to express the

---

<sup>172</sup> *The Catholic Cemetery A Vision for the Millennium*. Des Plaines, IL: The National Catholic Cemetery Conference. 1997. Articles 15 and 17.

<sup>173</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. 2447.



blessedness of the dead.<sup>174</sup> Eternal rest encompasses the profound hope and expectation of bodily resurrection. This notion connects the sacraments to the ministry of Catholic cemeteries, an educational ministry contributing to the catechesis of the community on important topic areas of sick, suffering, dying and death. The liturgy and the cemetery provide safe and sacred places for grief to be experienced and expressed and so be exposed for healing.

A cemetery for many is a symbol of sorrow but in Catholic life, the Catholic cemetery is a symbol of hope. Catholics should be encouraged to visit to help in their education on the purpose of a Catholic cemetery and its symbol of faith, consolation and hope.

### **The Catholic Cemetery and Memory**

The Catholic cemetery, with its adornments, rituals, symbols, and prayer practices offers the community memory and a legacy from the past to carry into the future. A Catholic cemetery features memorial statues, gravestones and brass memorials, burial places of notable personalities of bishops, clergy and key personalities in the life of the Church. Many Catholic cemeteries include a chapel, mausoleum buildings, offices adorned with Catholic photos and character. A line from the *Instruction Ad resurgendum cum Christo* article 3 is a fitting way to capture the essence of the Catholic Cemetery:

In memory of the death, burial and resurrection of the Lord, the mystery that illumines the Christian meaning of death, **burial** is above all the most fitting way to express faith and hope in the resurrection of the body.<sup>175</sup>

---

<sup>174</sup> German Martinez. *Signs of Freedom, Theology of Christian Sacraments*. Mahwah: Paulist Press, 2003. 147.

<sup>175</sup> *Ad resurgendum cum Christo*. Article 3.

The cemetery is also a cultural landscape that represents, albeit slowly, social changes in communities. The cemetery is evidence of social trends, cultural patterns, prevailing ideologies with gravestones as remnants of beliefs and practices of the deceased.<sup>176</sup>

In Pope Francis' recent encyclical letter *Fratelli Tutti*, he spoke of the importance of memory. In articles 246-249 he reflects on the Shoah or Holocaust as events not to be forgotten; forgetting is never an answer. The Pope advises that society cannot move forward without remembering the past; progress is not made without an honest and unclouded memory. Society must “keep alive the flame of collective conscience, bearing witness to succeeding generations to the horror of what happened,” because that witness “awakens and preserves the memory of the victims, so that conscience of humanity may rise up in the face of every desire for dominance and destruction.”<sup>177</sup> The Catholic Cemetery plays a role in memory, for victims, for the war dead, for families working through the loss of a loved one and for future generations to witness to care and attention provided to those who have died.

### **Connecting the Funeral Rite and Sacred Burial with the Healing Sacraments**

The Church's pastoral care challenge is one of education and promoting correct understanding, so the Catholic community does not default to non-Catholic or ersatz rituals, thus not benefitting from the full meaning and healing wisdom the Church offers. Currently Church catechesis of the sacraments is done mostly individually. There is an

---

<sup>176</sup> Meredith Watkins. *The Cemetery and Cultural Memory: Montreal, 1860-1900*. Source. Urban History Review. Vol. 31, No. 1. Pp. 52-62. University of Toronto Press. Fall 2002.

<sup>177</sup> Pope Francis. *Fratelli Tutti, on Fraternity and Social Friendship*. Encyclical Letter. 2020.

opportunity to promote the sacraments as a continuity or continuum. *The Catechism* does point out a unity with other sacraments. Article 1525 states:

Thus, just as the sacraments of Baptism, Confirmation and the Eucharist form a unity called “the sacraments of Christian initiation,” so too it can be said that Penance, the Anointing of the Sick and Eucharist as viaticum constitute at the end of Christian life “**the sacraments that prepare for our heavenly homeland**” or the sacraments that complete the earthly pilgrimage.<sup>178</sup>

Author Lizette Larson-Miller in her book *The Sacrament of Anointing of the Sick*, speaks of the sacrament of the anointing as both unique and in “communion” with all other sacramental encounters. With the communion of sacraments in mind, the following figure (Figure 2) illustrates a connection of these healing sacraments.<sup>179</sup>

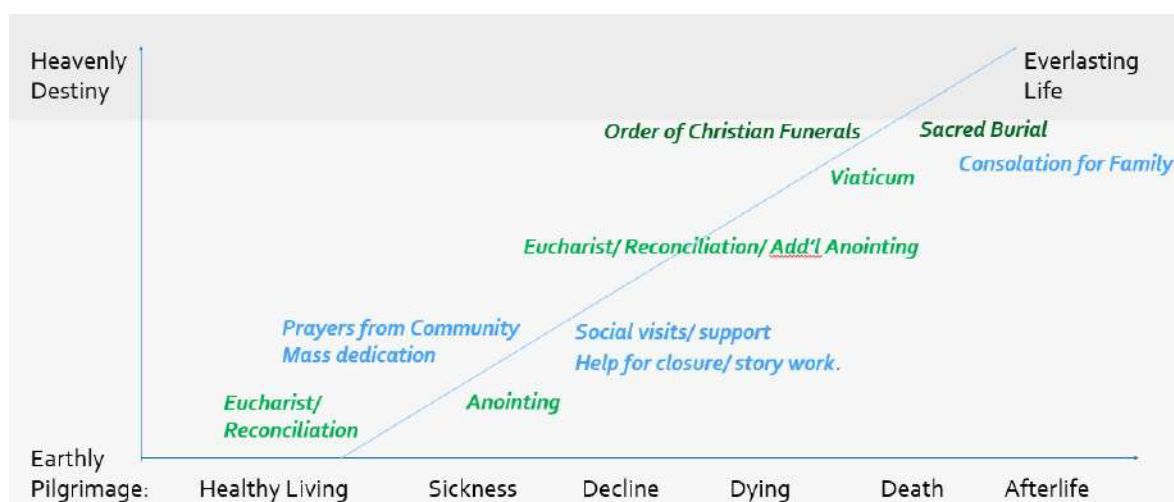


Figure 2. Sacraments/ Rites Towards our Heavenly Home. Developed by Peter Nobes for a paper examining the Sacrament of Anointing the Sick. 2019.

The lower x-axis is the earthly pilgrimage from health to dying to death, and to the afterlife. The y-axis plots our earthly pilgrimage to our heavenly destiny. The sacraments (light green) are plotted along the journey. The comments in blue represent

<sup>178</sup> Catechism of the Catholic Church. 1525.

<sup>179</sup> For a course in Moral Theology, the figure was prepared for a term paper on the topic of anointing. My sense was to put anointing on a continuum of life stage and life transition.

ecclesial and social support considerations such as a Mass dedication for one that is sick. The diagram is offered as a teaching and communications tool. The **dark green** shows the connection to the funeral liturgy and sacred burial. In parish presentations the Catholic cemetery is explained as a bridge between the Church on earth and the Church in Heaven.

Illness or pain effects the whole person, which impacts and has consequences on other members of a family or community. Parish communities can encourage use of the sacraments through the services of groups like extraordinary ministers of Holy Communion, lay pastoral care teams as well as other volunteers. Today's pastoral care practitioners work on healing ministry in cooperation with medicine and healthcare practitioners all as interconnected components in the care of the whole person. Kasza points out that illness affects all parts of one's being and affects the whole community. Sickness, especially if it is more serious can cause depression and can alienate a person from society, from themselves and even from God.<sup>180</sup> From a theological sphere a person can never really be alone as God is always present. Kasza reminds us that despite the fallen condition of humanity, God in his mercy sent Jesus to restore relationships. Jesus redeemed creation. Kasza points out that sickness does not need to end in sorrow, for illness too can lead to redemption, transformation, and wholeness. Connecting the funeral rite and sacred burial to the healing sacraments adds further value. As ministry and means of consolation, they are part of healing and Christian end-of-life to eternal life preparation process. Education on the continuum of sacraments lets parishioners know the full

---

<sup>180</sup> John Kasza. *Oxford Handbook of Sacramental Theology*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015. 564.

benefits available to them and extends the love of Christ in word, in practice and in experience. This provides formation for end-of-life in helping to alleviate anxiety about life's natural end.

Amidst the secular culture, the pastoral care challenge is to continually improve education to the community on the purpose of the sacraments and how they work in communion with the funeral rite and sacred burial. They are practical demonstrations of God's love for humanity and how the Church conveys its hope in the resurrection amongst its faithful.

## Chapter 4 Experiences at Catholic Cemeteries Vancouver

The Roman Catholic Cemeteries of the Archdiocese of Vancouver (RCCAV) is a member of the *Catholic Cemetery Conference* and aligns to the Conference's creed. Its purpose statement aligns the conference:

We bury the dead, comfort families, evangelize the living, educate, and support families to prepare for end-of-life and provide sacred space for prayer and worship.<sup>181</sup>

RCCAV's day-to-day experience is that people most often make their arrangements in at-need circumstances, in which RCCAV does its best to take care of the whole person. The role is to educate the living and provide materials linked to the Gospel message and rich teaching for Christian end-of-life. It is frequently challenging to collaborate effectively with parish life, as Catholic cemeteries ministry is often seen as a ministry only to be called upon when an individual family need arises. Given the natural human avoidance toward planning/preparing for death, it has been the organization's experience that the community generally avoids invitations to webinars and educational events. To encourage pre-need arrangement, a process of advance planning for a future need also known as "pre-need planning" must be a process of education for individuals needing to be evangelized on the mysteries of death and eternal life with instruction provided on the meaning of Christ's resurrection and what it means for each person. Although there is a business aspect in making one's funeral arrangements, it is (for many) a formational and learning process. Community advocacy is pursued for individuals to make pre-arrangements and to take that opportunity not only to practically prepare but to

---

<sup>181</sup> Cited on The Roman Catholic Cemeteries of the Archdiocese of Vancouver's web site at <https://rccav.org/about> Date 31 January 2021.

enter into a deeper understanding of the mysteries of death and eternal life. Preparation prevents confusions and unwanted problems including: the scattering of ashes; urns being stored at home; community members being overcharged by corporate-for profit providers. The process of purchasing a grave often helps prevent the skipping of consulting a priest during dying, or at time of death, which would result in a loss of sacramental rituals and pastoral care. Greater frequency of end-of-life/ eternal life education from the pulpit and continuing to strive for meaningful ways to engage curiosity on the matter in local parish communities are also critically important.

As part of its educational role, RCCAV encourages visits and tours of the cemetery and frequently offers open house events (scaled down during Covid-19). The organization also invites students from Catholic schools for visits. Students visiting the cemetery are provided instruction, an opportunity to do service work such as cleaning priests' or veterans' graves, and prayer at graves of loved ones they may have buried at the cemetery. An example of the need for such education occurred when a grade 12 student went to pray at the grave of her grandfather who had died a year prior to the visit. When at the grave, she cried and was very upset. She was comforted by staff who realized she had not been to the funeral, nor had ever visited the cemetery. Wanting to protect the child, the parents had not permitted her to attend the religious services or burial. She had had an important relationship with her grandfather and had not come to peace with his passing. The outpouring of grief from this young person, coupled with coming to terms with the experience of loss resulted in her being comforted by seeing his resting place in a Catholic cemetery surrounded by symbols and gardens, staff and

visitors praying for loved ones. This example shows the importance of encouraging participation in funerals and burials and education of the community at all levels.

RCCAV hired a religious education teacher for a summer project to create lessons that could be used in religious education curriculum. As a result Greater Vancouver Catholic schools now have age-appropriate lesson templates. An exchange of lessons with the Diocese of Phoenix was made to provide complete coverage from kindergarten to grade thirteen. The challenge is to have these implemented in each school.

In 2015, RCCAV published a prayer booklet for the month of Holy Souls, providing a prayer for each day in the month of November as well as explanations about a Catholic cemetery, the doctrine of purgatory, devotional practices and other rituals. This booklet has been overwhelmingly welcomed in Vancouver parishes. Booklets, pamphlets and a web site with videos and prayer resources also serve and support educational functions for the community.

Each fall in Vancouver and in many Catholic cemeteries across North America, new programs have been instituted on promoting the Hallowtide triduum – a lesser known triduum encompassing All Hallows' Eve, All Saints' Day, and All Souls' Day. A candlelight vigil for All Hallows' Eve is offered inviting families to the cemetery for prayers and a candlelight procession. For All Souls' Day in 2020 and in past years the cemetery hosted Archbishop J. Michael Miller as celebrant at Mass which in 2020 was livestreamed to thousands. The Covid-19 pandemic has restricted funeral gathering sizes and support for families to gather together in person. In His 2020 homily Archbishop Miller raised many important points:

As we celebrate this Eucharist, let us remember that resting here are merely the mortal remains of the faithful departed who await the final resurrection from the



dead. Today we reaffirm with them our bonds of communion that death is unable to break. With them we all remain part of a spiritual ‘company’ – the Communion of Saints – where profound solidarity reigns, and the good works and prayers of each one service the benefit of everyone.<sup>182</sup>

The archbishop spoke of the hope of immortality to come, with thanks to Jesus that death no longer has power over the departed (cf. Rm 6:9) as he has already made the journey through death. Connecting this to our last journey, Archbishop Miller referred to words from Pope Francis:

Jesus assures us that he does not await us only the end of our long journey but accompanies us in each of our days. For us, ‘to hope means the certainty of being on a journey with Christ toward the Father who awaits us.’ Hope does not disappoint us (Rom 5:5). God – and God alone – is the foundation and reason for our hope.<sup>183</sup>

This message is both timely and timeless.

### **Planners versus Non-Planners**

In a quantitative study fielded in 2014 by the RCCAV, only 20% of the adult population in Metro Vancouver had taken steps towards funeral and prearrangement plans while 80% had not.<sup>184</sup> A study published in 2010 by Pollara Research across Canada indicated 12% of adults 35 and older and 17% of adults 55 and older made some preparations.<sup>185</sup> The incidence rate increases with age but does not vary significantly by ethnicity or other characteristics such as income, and frequency of attending church. The 2014 study revealed that over 66% had a will, so the mental construct of some level of

---

<sup>182</sup> Archbishop Michael J. Miller. Archbishop of Vancouver. Mass of the Holy Souls homily of 2 November 2020 held at the Gardens of Gethsemani Catholic Cemetery. With reference to Cf. Benedict XVI, Angelus (1 November 2009).

<sup>183</sup> Holy Bible. The New Revised Standard Version. Catholic Bible Press. Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1993. Romans 5:5.

<sup>184</sup> Mustel Research. Long-term Strategic Planning Market Research (quantitative study of Metro Vancouver Catholics). 2014.

<sup>185</sup> Pollara Research. Attitudes and Impressions of the Funeral Service Industry. 2010.

end-of-life preparation is evident for one's financial affairs but this construct is not translated to the same degree to other estate aspects such as funeral and burial pre-arrangements.

Elizabeth Arnup's study for the Vanier Institute, uncovered a common and widespread myth that government, through health care and eldercare systems, and family will take care of everything when a loved one is dying. People with strong family support systems find dealing with things as they come and having family involved can be fulfilling and meaningful. Proprietary qualitative research sponsored by the RCCAV identified underlying fears that are emotional barriers for people to prepare.<sup>186</sup>

### Emotional Barriers to Engage in Preparation/ Reluctance to Plan

Finding:	Insights:
Fear of Death, Deterioration and the Unknown	Great deal of denial about death. Visceral fear of physical harm or bodily deterioration. Afraid of small spaces, of the dark, being enclosed...burn, liquify, disintegration.
Fear of Abandonment/ being Alone	Afraid of being left alone – avoidance of end-of-life (consider this as the very reason they need to plan). Starting arrangements is often seen as bad omen, inviting death.
Fear of Loss of Control & Freedom	Afraid of abdicating control. When people feel out of control, they may start to distrust the situation and the people who are helping them to manage their affairs.
Fear of Loss of Respect & Betrayal	People going through loss warrant a high respect. Especially sensitive to disrespectful conversations, behavior and disruptive physical surroundings. When vulnerable prone to feel manipulated.

---

<sup>186</sup> Right Brain qualitative research study. Vancouver. The Right Brain Group. 2015.

Fear of Loss of Self-identity	Decisions must support who they are and what makes them unique. Want to make practical and rational decisions considering the relationship between material world and eternal life.
-------------------------------	--

All too often providers like RCCAV observe the sorrow and chaos experienced by families who do not have plans. This involves the reality of families having to make many decisions in sorrow, triggered by a death in the family, with decisions required to be made in a very short time period. For those who find themselves having to make life or death choices for a loved one without having discussed the individual's wishes, the process can be overwhelming, leaving family members with a lingering sense of guilt or regret (Emanuel, von Gunten, & Ferris, 2000).<sup>187</sup> RCCAV on the other hand regularly serves families who are pursuing pre-need plans. When a death occurs it is much smoother for the family, for the Church and for the community.

In 2020, the RCCAV buried 1 in 7 Catholics that died in Metro Vancouver.<sup>188</sup> Of the 6 remaining: 2-3 are going to corporate funeral providers (often being oversold and in many cases having only a funeral home "chapel" service versus a funeral Mass in a Catholic parish); 2-3 are leaving urns at home; and 1-2 are scattering ashes.<sup>189</sup> The last two practices are not in alignment with church teaching and if plans are left to non-practising children a Funeral Mass is often skipped. Deaths are expected to increase 3 percent a year because of an aging society.<sup>190</sup> In Metro Vancouver only 3% of Catholic

---

<sup>187</sup> von Gunten CF<sup>1</sup>, Ferris FD, Emanuel LL. (2000), *The patient-physician relationship. Ensuring competency in end-of-life care: communication and relational skills*. *JAMA*. 2000 Dec 20;284(23):3051-7.

<sup>188</sup> This is an internal calculation looking at at-need burials divided by the total Catholic deaths in Metro Vancouver, calculated from provincial statistics and census population data.

<sup>189</sup> Internal Catholic Cemeteries data plus general market share assessment based on qualitative interviews. 2017.

<sup>190</sup> Government Statistics BC as sourced from [www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/data/statistics/people-population-community/population/vital-statistics](http://www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/data/statistics/people-population-community/population/vital-statistics)

adults over the age of 50 have a pre-arrangement plan with RCCAV, whereas over 66% have a will.<sup>191</sup> Many Catholic adults already have pre-arrangements with corporate providers. But the gap between those that have a will compared to those that have a will AND a pre-arrangement plan for sacred burial space is one the Church needs to be addressed. It has been discussed at the annual Catholic Cemetery Conference and it is generally agreed that the majority of older Catholics do not have pre-arrangement plans. Potential research would focus the correlation between the belief in eternal life and the practical reality of having a funeral and burial plan.

---

<sup>191</sup> Internal contract number divided by the number of Catholic Adults in Metro Vancouver 60+. 2/3rds sourced from 2014 Quantitative Study.

## Chapter 5 Preparation for Death and Eternal Life is a Virtuous Act to be Encouraged

There are many religious and psychological benefits to having pre-arrangement plans in place. Avoidance of death and the consequences of being poorly prepared can leave many people with significant emotional, financial, and spiritual distress.

Being prepared for death includes *preparing mentally* to come to acceptance that earthly life will one day end; *preparing spiritually* to accept that we are participants in Christ's passion, death, and resurrection; and *preparing practically* to develop an estate that includes a will, a funeral plan, sacred burial space, plus one's intent for health care.

End-of-life preparation involves gaining knowledge, discerning choices, reflecting, and reasoning on Church teaching, then preparing documentation that reflects one's values, faith, and beliefs. Another important element is to share plans with family through meaningful conversations. This work is formative for the one pursuing the plan and those with whom plans are shared.

What can be proposed to encourage more people to acquire information, engage in critical reflection and make practical plans as virtuous acts leading to happiness, freedom, and further character formation? This section puts the act of preparation through the filter of moral theology which addresses the question of "what constitutes the good life?" -- a life that is fulfilling, satisfying, rewarding, and flourishing.

The Church teaches God alone constitutes the supreme good for the human person and a personal relationship with God is beatitude.<sup>192</sup> She is here to guide and strengthen this experience through teaching, liturgy, sacraments, and prayer. Preparation for death and eternal life orients a person's ultimate happiness and is claimed to be a virtuous act. Clergy and lay leaders need to further promote that a Catholic's preparation for death and eternal life is a virtuous act resulting in liberation from anxiety, and direction towards living fully in Christian fulfillment.

The Catholic cemetery organization is primarily a ministry and an expression of the Church's faith responding to the needs of her members. A Catholic cemetery organization supports education and formation through workshops and advisory services on pre-arrangement planning, and through its presence, art, symbols, and special events. Findings from a 2014 quantitative study by RCCAV identified key motivators for pre-planning: to ensure wishes are carried out, and to save others from the stress of funeral details. Secondary reasons include removing the financial burden of a funeral, and ensuring they are buried near family or friends.

### **Catholic Virtues Support Preparation for End-of-life and Eternal Life**

Preparation for end-of-life and eternal life is reviewed through the theological and cardinal virtues. The Catechism defines virtue as the habitual and firm disposition to do the good. It allows the person not only to perform good acts, but to give the best of himself.<sup>193</sup> Applied to preparation, this good is not only for the individual, but benefits their family and their community. For those in our community with modest to higher

---

<sup>192</sup> Cessario, Romanus. *The Virtues, Or the Unexamined Life*. New York: Continuum International Publishing, 2002. 10.

<sup>193</sup> Catechism of the Catholic Church. 1803. Commentary in the right-hand column of the table is based on RCCAV leadership discussions and field experiences.

religious and spiritual beliefs, they can best live them out by pursuing the virtuous path of preparedness with the intentionality of happiness for themselves and the lives they touch. Mattison III defines intention as a goal or purpose toward which we direct ourselves with the rationale that what we do leads to happiness. However, there is often a gap between intention and action as it relates to planning for the end of our mortal life. This is evidenced in lower numbers of those with a funeral and burial plan as compared to the number of those with a will. The following table reviews preparation through theological and cardinal virtues.<sup>194</sup>

Virtue:	Application to Preparation:
Faith (virtuous belief) <sup>195</sup> – and the corresponding gifts of intelligence and knowledge.	Faith in the resurrection results in hope and a reduction in fear of the unknown. It can avert the sin of anger. Faith is cited as one of the wings of the dove, the other reason. Faith is needed to seek the truth and to live by the truth. It is the virtue by which we believe truthful answers.
Hope – and the corresponding gift of fear (of hopelessness).	Hope is union with God in the life to come which minimizes fear of death and the unknown. It provides a positive outlook. It requires reflection on the meaning of death and what is hope...heaven, eternal life, the fullness of life, union with God, or seeing God face-to-face.
Charity (Christian love) – and the corresponding gift of wisdom.	Charity inclines us to the sorts of actions that lead us and others to the ultimate destiny of union with God, which is true happiness. It can be argued preparing one's plan is a charitable act towards the family – a wonderful expression of love and one's love for God.
Prudence – practical wisdom and the gift of counsel.	Prudence is key to the process in covering careful consideration of the spiritual and practical aspects of planning. A prudent discernment may help the person discover peace for their destiny and see rightly in preparing responsibly.

---

<sup>194</sup> This table was developed for an assignment in a Moral Theology course at St. Mark's College during study of the virtues. 2018.

<sup>195</sup> Mattison. *Introducing Moral Theology*. 38.

Justice – with the virtue of religion and the corresponding gift of piety.	Justice is the virtue that inclines us to good relationships with others. Following the Golden Rule certainly applies: “Do unto others as you would have done to you.” (Matt. 7:12). Planning helps the family and the community.
Fortitude – and the gift of courage.	Courage is required to face one’s mortality and address the topic responsibly. Thinking of the two components attack and endurance; in death, or in sickness that may be terminal, one must endure. One may also attack the disease and the notion of death.
Temperance – and the gift of fear.	The notion of Christian modesty comes to play here tempering the sin of pride and envy. Should a funeral be lavish with an expensive casket, etc.? Or should a funeral be modest reflecting reverence for the Lord, humility, and a life of Christian faith, hope and charity?

Christian death is rooted in a faith journey of on-going conversion, but dwelling exceedingly on sin (such as sloth or pride) does not motivate people to prepare well in advance. That would be a step towards the morality of obligation. Engaging in a process of preparation often leads to personal conversion, making right one’s relationship with God, engaging in the healthy practice of doing a life review and preparing one’s family for the inevitable transition each human person faces. The Catechism outlines this in paragraph 1014:

The Church encourages us to prepare ourselves for the hour of our death. In the ancient litany of the saints, for instance she has us pray: “From a sudden and unforeseen death, deliver us O Lord”; to ask the Mother of God to intercede for us “at the hour of our death” in the Hail Mary; and to entrust ourselves to St. Joseph, the patron of a happy death.

Death can be faced with fear, anxiety and avoidance but if we address our mortality with Christian hope, facing death can lead to a place of acceptance and consequently to conscious planning and even practical preparation.

Mattison III cites that moral theology is an exploration of the question “what is a good life?” with pursuit of answers to contemporary questions on how to live lives



nourished by smart and holy people. The virtues are stable qualities that enable a person to live a good life, a happy life.

St. Thomas Aquinas observed that people long to be happy.<sup>196</sup> Socrates argues that the just or moral life is the good life. He states in the *Crito*, the most important question is not simply how to live but how to live well.<sup>197</sup> Our philosophical fathers as well as leading Christian thinkers such as Saints Augustine and Thomas Aquinas, answer this question, “to live virtuously, or in a morally good manner.” The most fulfilling and happy life is one rooted in the love of God and the love of neighbour, as Christ commands.

Those in the community with modest to high religious and spiritual convictions, can best pursue the virtuous path of preparedness with the conscious purpose of happiness for themselves and the lives they touch. Planning requires careful reflection on the values of family, faith, responsibility to self and community. Choosing to defer planning reflects one’s values as well, the value of living for today, of focusing intentions to other areas of need which may be to serve the family as best one can with the resources one has. The mere act of discussing intentions could alleviate fear of death and the unknown. It takes care, responsibility, courage and fortitude to prepare thoroughly.

Preparations made with conscious intent of final interment in a Catholic cemetery and for a Funeral Mass is a testament to one’s faith, one’s hope in the resurrection and the charity it provides their loves ones. It passes on values.

---

<sup>196</sup> Aquinas, Thomas St., *Summa Theologiae*, English Dominican trans. (New York: Benziger, 1948), I-II 1.

<sup>197</sup> *Crito*, *Plato: Euthyphro; Apology of Socrates; and Crito*, Oxford University Press, 1924-01-01. 48-49.

Funeral and burial are expenses that can be best met if planned in advance. Pre-arranged plans can range between \$7k and \$40k – a significant expense for many without the financial means. Many people do not anticipate the cost or are ignorant on the amount. Often there are challenges or ignorance of church teaching or understanding of the value in Catholic choices. Realistically cost can be a barrier to engage in such planning. Costs are also a factor for many in choosing cremation over traditional casket burial as costs are much lower for cremation. For others without the financial means, payment plans are the only options and can place a financial burden on the arranger. The government offers social assistance on final funeral and burial costs, but the amount is often deficient or leaves the family with few options.

## Emotional Needs and Decision-Making Factors

Catholic Cemeteries of the Archdiocese of Vancouver conducted research in June 2015 to better understand the needs and barriers to planning. The following table outlines the internal, compelling desires that drive people to make decisions that fulfill those needs.<sup>198</sup>

Emotional Need	Comment
The Need for Community (desire for connection...)	Be taken care of by “my people” with shared values, beliefs, interests. A spiritual community – Mass of Remembrance. Candles, events, monthly mass, no-cost infant burial, etc. priests praying at cemeteries.
The Need for Spiritual Community	Someone has our backs “Catholicism is family oriented...” Drawn to the beauty of the church. At key times lapsers crave rituals – marriages, death is one of those noted by Angus Reid.
The Need for Self-Identity - expressing of some aspect of self that is unique and different.	Customs, family traditions, connection back to baptism (pall), home.... Beauty “walking on grounds akin to being in church”. Choices based on personality of deceased – “I want to please her” Also ...ties to pre-need. “The less I cause grief the better.” “I wish my dad made arrangements.”
The Need for Respect	Handling of body, arrangements, everything, grounds crew. Body is temple of the Holy Spirit – hence our reverence.
The Need for Family Legacy	Lasting impact on hearts and minds of others. Carrying on of traditions and values. Relationship after death. Family connections and future descendants.
The Need for Nurture	Help to grow physically, mentally and spiritually Help clients to feel loved and cared for and appreciated We will help you navigate this time with grace
The Need for Control	To control what happens after death Organize world around you so things run smoothly

---

<sup>198</sup> Right Brain Research Study. Roman Catholic Cemeteries of the Archdiocese of Vancouver. June 2015.

As a result of further discernment from the field interview, the study pointed to 3 areas of motivation in the context of planning – *hope, belonging, and alleviation of fear*.

Messages of hope, for example, work well for better formed parishioners whereas messages to soothe fears may work better for those with poor formation or whom may be engulfed in anxiety.

Church leaders can encourage preparation and touch upon some of the emotional and spiritual needs identified in the table to trigger wonder and to ask the community to take spiritual and practical steps.

### **Preparation Contributes to Meaning and Fulfillment**

The Church teaches us that a person can either accept or reject divine grace throughout one's life and even at the moment of death and calls Catholics to prepare for the coming of death and eternal life. A person operating out of morality of happiness can joyfully engage in pre-arrangement planning to enlighten themselves spiritually and practically and act with an intention to be happy. The process of engaging in one's eternal destiny helps to form the person and those surrounding them. Plans provide a model for the family and act as a testament of one's faith, hope and joy. The Church must offer hope and guidance. It must encourage the teaching of Groeschel to have members never to think of death alone but always in conjunction with eternal life and in his words, "life after death and the promise of eternal life should fill us with awe."<sup>199</sup>

Preparation for death is found in the way that we live our lives, and our practice of virtues. For the person of faith, the moral journey of growing in goodness and virtue,

---

<sup>199</sup> Benedict Groeschel. *After this Life*. 85.

of developing an intimate relationship of faith and friendship with Jesus Christ, necessarily involves considering the last things. Planning for a holy death, to use the language of the past, is something to be re-discovered, re-proposed by the Church as part of its New Evangelization. The practical components of planning are all part of this process. Preparation can bring satisfaction and a sense of liberation from anxieties. The Catholic cemetery is not simply the passive object of a choice in this process but is meant to participate actively and share intimately in the mission of the Church and her services to individuals and families facing these realities.

Death plays a role in a person's quest for meaning and fulfillment. Jesus Christ transformed death's meaning and offers existential fulfillment and hope for a heavenly destiny. As wayfarers, humans need the guidance and leadership of the Church to help illuminate the way so that anxiety and avoidance is overcome with a spirit of openness and wonder. Death is an inescapable meeting with the mystery of the unknown. It is better to engage the community on the topic living in Christian hope, else death can cast its shadow of meaninglessness over existence. Saints and contemporary faith leaders provide examples and models to serve as wayfarer's who prepared well for the land of the living. Groeschel's encourages us that "what we believe happens next is very much going to define what is happening to us right now." By focusing on what happens next we can be liberated from death anxiety and look forward to union with God. This outlook helps us live fully and to be fully alive.

## Conclusion with Pastoral Care Recommendations

Religion plays a key role in helping people make sense of big questions and can play a key role in existential explanations of death and eternal life. The simple appeal of life satisfaction and fulfillment shows that engagement in parish life results in higher satisfaction. By extension, the benefit of community enhances life satisfaction and support to engage with the mysteries of death and eternal life.

Clergy and lay leaders could help the Catholic community better engage in the mysteries of death and eternal life through parish community life and directly with parishioners to support each wayfarer's journey with a renewed effort to promote and defend important rituals, Catholic burial traditions, and spiritual and practical preparation. These lead to greater fulfillment of a Catholic's spiritual life now and at the hour of their death. Helping community members address their own mortality leads to a growing sense of fulfillment and liberation from anxiety around death. Preparing for earthly death and talking about eternal life is an act of sharing one's faith that benefits the Church's evangelical mission as well as individual well-being. A positive outlook on death also affects how one approaches critical illness, including the questions around prolonging dying unnecessarily through costly medical interventions. The life, death and resurrection of Christ, with the sacramental life, the prayers and practices of the Church offers a positive vision of dying with the hope of the resurrection and eternal life. This message must be more widely affirmed given the absence of a positive vision experienced in 21<sup>st</sup> century Western culture. Helping individuals to prepare for earthly death and their eternal destiny is ultimately a good thing for the individual, for the common good and for building up the Kingdom of God.

## Pastoral Care Recommendations

This thesis is a culmination of my experience as a director of a large Archdiocesan Catholic Cemeteries organization encompassing dialogue with Catholic cemetery professionals across North America, experiences with Catholic health professionals, and insights gained during the Master of Arts in Theological Studies program. Many course study areas were dedicated to eschatological topics.<sup>200</sup> The following recommendations are an expression of these experiences and my hope for the academic work in having a positive impact on pastoral care.

1. A reduction in religious awareness and an increase in secularization has further distanced humanity's experience and proximity to death, making it more anxiety provoking and a topic to be avoided in conversation. Therefore extraordinary efforts are needed to restore discourse about death in the Christian context and experience.
2. Death has become overly medicalized and is understood so to be avoided through medical intervention. The human body became defined by modern medicine and dying has been defined simply as a medical event. Death and aging have become viewed as enemy combatants. The Church needs to reclaim death as a passage to eternal life.

Fear of death is an existential issue. Jesus Christ is our model and the key to existential meaning. He transforms death for believers. The Church offers us the examples of saints and contemporary spiritual writers (Bernardin, Nouwen, John Paul II) for whom death was befriended and discussed openly. The Church needs to continually foster an openness towards befriending of death with emphasis on hope for eternal life.

---

<sup>200</sup> The Master of Arts Theological Studies program at St. Mark's College encompassed eleven courses. When appropriate for a course requirement such as a paper or issues paper, I wrote on topics that'd help the Catholic cemeteries ministry. For example, preparation as a virtuous act in the course on Moral Theology, another example on how Jesus Christ transforms death for Christology.

3. Preparation, both spiritual and practical, is claimed as a virtuous act and an act of kindness. All levels of archdiocesan leadership need to promote such preparation: priest to congregation; RCCAV directly to parishioners; RCCAV in partnership with funeral home providers; lay pastoral care workers on awareness of offerings and services. This promotion/evangelization includes apologetic arguments, homiletic content at appropriate times in the liturgical calendar, etc.
4. The Catholic virtue of hope is a theological virtue in which we desire the kingdom of heaven and eternal life as our happiness, placing our trust in Christ's promise. Christian hope and trust in God lower anxiety about death and contributes to an individual's sense of life fulfillment. These are nourished and increased through the sacraments and teaching. Greater catechesis is needed given the death avoidance issues identified in this thesis.
5. For homiletic and pastoral care considerations, clergy and lay workers can engage parishioners in the themes of hope, belonging, love, and in soothing fear. Church leaders are encouraged to foster an attitude taught by Benedict Groeschel: "what we believe happens next is very much going to define what is happening to us right now."<sup>201</sup> Also we must always speak of eternal life when the topic of death is addressed.
6. It is recommended that the funeral rite and sacred burial be explained and associated with the healing sacraments of Anointing of the Sick, Reconciliation, Eucharist and Eucharist as viaticum. Explained together this grouping provides a broader benefit picture on how the Church supports the pilgrim when they face later life issues.
7. Hope includes conveying the prayers, liturgy, support and practical services offered through the sacraments, the Order of Christian Funerals, sacred burial in a Catholic

---

<sup>201</sup> Groeschel. *After this Life*. 85-86.



cemetery and aftercare from the community. The Catholic cemetery needs to be taught as a place of hope and a “bridge” between the Church on earth and the Church in Heaven.

8. It is recommended that Catholic healthcare have a closer collaboration with Catholic deathcare, particularly towards re-establishing a positive vision of Christian end-of-life and the life-to-come. Catholic cemeteries as an educational and formational ministry can support formation of lay pastoral care workers. These lay pastoral care workers along with extraordinary ministers of Holy Communion, visit the homebound, the sick and Catholics in long term care. They are often asked about end-of-life preparations and therefore need to be well formed on Church teaching and aware of services available.

## Afterword

My hope is that this thesis contributes to the body of knowledge for the Catholic cemetery ministry both in Vancouver and for the Catholic Cemetery Conference in North America. My goal in writing this paper was to put academic rigour to the claim of addressing death as a mystery to be lived in Christian hope to reduce natural anxiety about death; liberate natural fear and to open up more exploration on the meaning of eternal life, thus assisting in living life more fully. I also sought to find research material to support apologetic arguments to inspire engagement with the topic to motivate preparation. Much of the evidence is from medical journals and broad truths of the faith. The contribution can be taken further in primary research to research the question of whether having specific pre-need burial and funeral plans liberates the person to live more fully, living with richer meaning and life fulfillment. Research would help cemetery leaders better understand if engaging in the practical process of planning stimulates Catholics to seek a deeper understanding of the mysteries of death and eternal life. Medical and theological research supported the claim that those who address their own mortality and who live with spirituality have less anxiety and experience greater meaning. The medical research was mostly with those facing a terminal illness. It is my hope to be able to use or republish information from this thesis to motivate greater attention on the need for catechesis for those *not* facing a terminal illness, thereby broadening people's understanding of life without end.

---

## Bibliography

### Primary Sources

*Catechism of the Catholic Church*. 2nd ed. Vatican City: Vatican Press, 1997.

*The Catholic Cemetery: A Vision for the Millennium*. Des Plaines: The National Catholic Cemetery Conference, 1997.

The Catholic Health Alliance of Canada. *Health Ethics Guide, Third Edition*. Ottawa: Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2012.

*Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*. Ottawa: Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2005.

Giussani, Luigi. *The Religious Sense*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1997.

Giussani, Luigi. *At the Origin of the Christian Claim*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1998.

Groeschel, Benedict J. *After This Life: What Catholics Believe about What Happens Next*. Huntington: Our Sunday Visitor Publishing, 2009.

Groeschel, Benedict J. *Spiritual Passages: The Psychology of Spiritual Development*. New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1983.

Holy Bible. The New Revised Standard Version. Catholic Bible Press. Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1993.

Mattison, William C. *Introducing Moral Theology True Happiness and the Virtues*. Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2008.

Nouwen, Henri. *Our Greatest Gift, A Meditation on Dying and Caring*. New York: Harper One, 1994.

*Order of Christian Funerals*. Ottawa: Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2016.

Pieper, Joseph. *Faith, Hope, Love*. San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2012.

Roche, James W. *Facing Death Discovering Life*. Ottawa: Catholic Health Care Association of Canada, 2000.

Rutherford, Richard. *What Makes Catholic Cemeteries & Funeral Service Catholic*. Presentation at the Catholic Cemeteries and Funeral Services of the West Conference. Phoenix, 2019.

- Rutherford, Richard, and Tony Barr. *The Death of a Christian: The Order of Christian Funerals*. Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, Revised Edition, 1990.
- Spitzer, Robert. *Finding True Happiness: Satisfying Our Restless Hearts*. San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2015.
- Urs von Balthasar, Hans. *The Christian and Anxiety*. San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1989.
- Varisco, Daniel Martin. *The End of Life, The Ends of Life: An Anthropological View*. *Journal of the Islamic Medical Association of North America*. 43(3). 2011. 203.
- YouCat *Youth Catechism of the Catholic Church*. San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2010.

### *Vatican Publications*

- Ad resurgendum cum Christo, regarding the burial of the deceased and the conservation of the ashes in the case of cremation*. Instruction from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. 2016. Retrieved March 21, 2021, from <https://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/bollettino/pubblico/2016/10/25/161025c.html>
- Evangelium Vitae, on the Value and Inviolability of Human Life*. 1995. John Paul II. Retrieved March 21, 2021, from [http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_enc\\_25031995\\_evangelium-vitae.html](http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_25031995_evangelium-vitae.html)
- Fides et Ratio, on the Relationship between Faith and Reason*. Encyclical Letter. 1998. John Paul II. Retrieved March 21, 2021, from [http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_enc\\_14091998\\_fides-et-ratio.html](http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_14091998_fides-et-ratio.html)
- Fratelli Tutti, on Fraternity and Social Friendship*. Encyclical Letter. 2020: Francis. (2020, October 03). Retrieved March 21, 2021, from [http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco\\_20201003\\_enciclica-fratelli-tutti.html](http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20201003_enciclica-fratelli-tutti.html)
- Gaudium et Spes, on the Church in the Modern World*. Pastoral Constitution. 1965. Retrieved March 21, 2021, from [https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_const\\_19651207\\_gaudium-et-spes\\_en.html](https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html)
- Lumen Gentium*. Dogmatic Constitution on the Church. 1964. Retrieved March 21, 2021, from [https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_const\\_19641121\\_lumen-gentium\\_en.html](https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html)
- Sacrosanctum Concilium*. Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy. 1963. Retrieved March 21, 2021, from

[https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_const\\_19631204\\_sacrosanctum-concilium\\_en.html](https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19631204_sacrosanctum-concilium_en.html)

*Samaritanus Bonus on the care of persons in the critical and terminal phases of life.* Letter. 2007: Retrieved March 21, 2021, from [https://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc\\_con\\_cfaith\\_doc\\_20200714\\_samaritanus-bonus\\_en.html](https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20200714_samaritanus-bonus_en.html)

*Spe Salvi, in hope we are saved.* 2007: Benedict xvi. (2007, November 29). Retrieved March 21, 2021, from [http://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_enc\\_20071130\\_spe-salvi.html](http://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi_enc_20071130_spe-salvi.html)

### Secondary Sources

Arnup, Katherine. *Family Perspectives: Death and Dying in Canada*. Ottawa: The Vanier Institute of the Family, 2018.

Becker, Ernest. *The Denial of Death*. New York: Free Press Paperbacks, 1973.

Brettler, M. Z., Newsom, C. A., & Perkins, P. *The new Oxford annotated Bible: New Revised Standard version*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2018.

Cessario, Romanus. *The Virtues, Or the Unexamined Life*. New York: Continuum International Publishing, 2002.

Covey, Stephen. *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*. London: Simon & Schuster, 1989.

Donne, John. *The Holy Sonnets*. Newton: Vicarage Hill Press, 2014.

Dunne, John S. *Time and Myth*. Garden-City: Doubleday, 1973.

Faust, D. G. *This Republic of Suffering: Death and the American Civil War*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2012.

Frankl, Viktor E. *Man's Search for Meaning*. Boston: Beacon Press, 2019.

Gawande, Atul. *Being Mortal*. Toronto: Anchor Canada, 2017.

Garvey, John. *Death and the Rest of Our Life*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005.

Hahn, Scott. *Hope to Die: The Christian Meaning of Death and the Resurrection of the Body*. Steubenville: Emmaus Road Publishing, 2020.

Hanning, Ryan. *Clergy Interview Study on Catholic Funerals*. Phoenix, 2018

Kasza, John. *Oxford Handbook of Sacramental Theology*. Oxford: Oxford University

- Press, 2015.
- Kübler-Ross, Elisabeth. *On death and dying: Questions and answers on death and dying; On life after death*. New York: Quality Paperback Book Club, 2002.
- Kubler-Ross, Elisabeth. *The Tunnel and the Light: Essential Insights on Living and Dying*. New York: Marlow & Company, 1999.
- Kuhl, David R. *What Dying People Want: Practical Wisdom for the End of Life*. Toronto: Anchor Canada, 2002.
- Martos, Joseph. *Doors to the Sacred: A Historical Introduction to Sacraments in the Catholic Church: Updated and Expanded with Charts and Glossary*. Liguori: Liguori Publications, 2014.
- Martinez, German. *Signs of Freedom, Theology of Christian Sacraments*. Mahwah: Paulist Press, 2003.
- Mitford, Jessica. *The American Way of Death Revisited*. New York: Random House, 2000. As cited in Lee Hill – *A Grand Guy: The Life and Art of Terry Southern*, Bloomsbury, 2001.
- O'Connor, James T. *Land of the Living*. New York: Catholic Book Publishing Co., 1992.
- O'Rourke, Michelle. *Befriending Death: Henri Nouwen and a Spirituality of Dying*. Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2009.
- Pilch, John J. *Healing in the New Testament*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2000.
- The Roman Missal*. Ottawa: CCCB, 2011.
- Ratzinger, Joseph. Pope Benedict XVI. *Jesus of Nazareth. Vol. II: Holy Week, from the Entrance into Jerusalem to the Resurrection*. San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2011.
- Solomon, Sheldon and Jeff Greenberg and Tom Pyszczynski. *The Worm at the Core: On the Role of Death in Life*. UK: Penguin Random House UK, 2016.
- Spiro, Howard, McCrea Curnen, Mary G. and Wandel, Lee Palmer. *Facing Death. Where Culture, Religion, and Medicine Meet*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996.
- Tillich, Paul and Harvey Cox. *The Courage to Be*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014.
- Toffler, Alvin. *The Third Wave*. London. Black Rose Books, 1980.

von Balthasar, Hans Urs. *The Christian and Anxiety*. 3. Vol. 3. 2 Nd. San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1989.

Wilbricht, Stephen. *Baptismal Ecclesiology and the Order of Christian Funerals*. Chicago: Liturgical Training Publications, 2018.

Wolfelt, Alan. *Creating Meaningful Funeral Ceremonies: A Guide for Caregivers*. New York: Routledge, 1994.