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For Immediate Release

Headline: Christian Traditions For Honoring the Dead

This time of the year, when all the greenery has faded from view and the harvest is in, Christians often turn their minds to thoughts of the last things. Death is all around is. This is reinforced with the statistically higher incidence of the natural death of loved ones from November through March.

The cultural imperative for the honoring of the dead has been variously practiced by ancient cultures to the present day. Egyptians honored the bodies of kings with pyramids, and burial grounds were set aside by aboriginal tribes in North and South America. In times before Christ, the Jewish people honored the earthly remains of their loved ones, burying them and marking their graves, visiting these places and even praying to God for them with funeral ceremonies. The most ancient Jews and Christians have celebrated the dead, well after the burial with memorial prayers such as the Mourner's Kaddish at Yom Kippur, and Catholic Masses celebrated for the dead.

For Jews, the value of honoring the body of the deceased was also rooted in the creation story and the peculiar covenant relationship between the creator and the Hebrew people. About 300 years before Christ, some strains of Judaism (e.g. Pharisees) began to speak of the resurrection of the body of the faithful on the Day of God.

Christians, with their peculiar anthropology springing from the Son of God's honoring the human race by becoming one of us to save us, took up the traditions of

funerals and memorial prayers from Judaism. They also took customs for the dead from Greek and Roman culture. Greeks and Romans both cared and even planned for the disposition of one's body after death. Another Mediterranean custom included praying to the dead for intercession with the gods (or God). For these reasons, it is rather common to find graves from antiquity to the present time from all over the world.

In the Catholic and Orthodox Faiths it is considered a disrespect of the dead not to bury them. Christians of all stripes, until recently, held that bodily burial in a casket was the norm, and that it was in this way that we best honored the dead members of our families. Christians also have traditionally considered the dispersal of bones or remains to be of pagan origin and therefore prohibited for believers.

When the Catholic Church allowed for cremation, it made sure to include in the laws concerning cremation that the burial should take place at the soonest possible time, that reservation from burial of all or part of the cremains was contrary to the faith, and that dispersal to the elements was also contrary to the faith. It states that integral burial (all in one grave) is to be given to each person's remains, whether in a casket or an urn for cremated bodies.

The reasons for integral burial are part of the very human need to grieve well for our psychological health, and to reflect on the Christian truth that the bonds of love do not end with death, but endure into eternal life. Those who cannot go to visit the graves of their ancestors become cut off from their past and the memory of their familial line and culture as well as (in Catholic and Orthodox circles) their intercession.

It would be good to evaluate our reasons for the recent abandonment of the practice of caring for the remains of our loved ones. Some sociologists have found that

the messiness of disposing of the dead and all the emotion that surrounds it are in part to blame.

According to some studies, those who have not reconciled with God or with family deceased members variously want to avoid the whole question of the meaning of life and death, heaven and hell (with respect to God). Many want to avoid even their own selves the un-forgiven offenses and unfinished business they have with the deceased. Being at a funeral and arranging for someone's funeral puts one right in the middle of all these feelings. They many times want to avoid their emotional reaction and so "have it taken care of" without even being present.

There is also the 'get it over with' attitude toward the funeral and grieving, which fundamentally dishonors both their psychological process and the memory of the dead. Furthermore, the fear of being discarded on the trash-heap of suppressed memories, or in a real sense being abandoned to 'whatever end' by our children is not a prospect that people want to face.

Finally, and a relatively small sample of people do this, we want to invest as little as is possible to get our family member buried, because we don't want to 'put our hard earned cash' toward a casket that will be here today and gone tomorrow.

The self-centeredness of Boomers, Gen-X'ers and Millennials is also to blame for this fundamental shift away from caring for, burying, and praying for the dead. We don't think of ourselves this way normally—as selfish people. Yet our actions speak so loud that our protestations fall on deaf ears.

As a pastor, I am deeply concerned about the aftermath of making efficient use of time at the expense of adequate grieving for deceased family members. Only time will

tell how this all works out. But an Abbot friend of mine used to say “If you don’t deal with it, it will deal with you. I am afraid of the future mental and physical health for many Americans who try to quickly and painlessly get rid of their dead parents, or children. I am also concerned as to what this is doing to our belief in the resurrection of the body and life everlasting, when we don’t care for the bodies God gave us, and don’t honor the body for carrying us around and giving us joy and companionship as well as ways to cope when things are not so well. And I wonder about where the spirit of Gratitude will end up at the end of our lives.

By burying the dead, we show love, gratitude, and honor to the memory of our beloved. We spend money on many things, but sell our deceased short when it is time to show signs of love for them. We do have funerals as much for ourselves as we do it for those around us and those we have appreciated even beyond this life. Yes tokens of love are costly, but we do that fairly freely until death. Let’s be more grateful to our beloved dead.