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## Keeping Vigil: Liturgical Praxis and Healing Ritual By Samantha Wegner

*This article is peer reviewed*

### Part 2

This article is presented in two parts. In the first instalment, the human act of caring for the dead was placed in socio-cultural context. The meaning of Christian Vigil for the dead was defined and a brief history of the Christian Vigil for the dead charted from the early Church through to the current Order of Christian Funerals. This second instalment investigates the liturgical theology of the rite, its nexus with modern multidisciplinary death studies and asks some critical questions about the ecological and ethical questions raised for Christians by their care for the dead and by the performance of the Vigil in contemporary Australia.

### The Liturgical Theology of the Rite and its nexus with Modern Multidisciplinary Death Studies

In the rituals surrounding death, liturgical theology must be attentive not only to the manner in which the Rites are expressive of the Paschal Mystery, how they communicate redemption and how they support full conscious and active participation, but they must also measure their success by how well they are communicative of Christian eschatological theology and the doctrine of resurrection. As Griffin notes 'liturgies went beyond reminding the living that they too would one day die and helped them to see that life so bound them to one another in Christ that the death of any person was part of the living and the dying of each other member of the community'<sup>1</sup>

This is a broad and deep scope and exemplifies the enormity of the work of the Second Vatican Council in the reform of the liturgy. Morrill identifies the Church's symbolic order as comprising 'Scripture, sacrament and ethics'<sup>2</sup>. While the Vigil may only be a sacramental celebration, this symbolic order is nonetheless represented in the Vigil, where scripture and ethics are the theological bookends to its ritual action. As with many of the Rites of the Catholic Church, the General Introduction to the OCF is a rich resource of theological explanation.<sup>3</sup> The predominant theological themes are identified as praise, thanksgiving, forgiveness, resurrection and eternal life, and the faith of the baptised in the Paschal Mystery. The key liturgical elements and symbols of the gathered Body of Christ, the Word of God in the Readings and Psalmody, the Intercessions, music and silence, are joined by the presence of the body of the deceased as the key symbolic locus.

Douglas Davies' work *The Theology of Death*<sup>4</sup>, approaches the theological underpinnings of death as they find their bodily human expression in ritual, as well as in contemporary thought. In Davies' thesis, his 'key focus of reflection lies with the body, this matrix and medium of our beliefs and values'<sup>5</sup>. Davies acknowledges that in the relatively safe societies

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1. Graeme Griffin, *Death and the Church: Problems and Possibilities* (East Malvern, Vic: Dove Communications, 1978), 42.

2. Bruce T. Morrill, 'Sacramental-Liturgical Theology Since Vatican II: The Dialectic of Meaning and Performance.' (Proceedings of the Catholic Theological Society of America, 2012), 67. <https://ejournals.bc.edu/index.php/ctsa/article/view/2173>

3. In addition to the General Introduction of the OCF, the *Ordo Exsequiarum*, 1969 is included in the OCF.

4. Douglas James Davies, *The Theology of Death* (London; New York: T & T Clark, 2008).

5. Davies, *The Theology of Death*, 4.

of the modern West 'by the twenty-first century death has become marginalised in everyday conversation and regular Christian teaching'<sup>6</sup> and encourages 'embodiment as a theoretical perspective'<sup>7</sup> for theology 'because it complements or offsets the unduly abstract and philosophical nature of much theological debate'<sup>8</sup>. Catherine Bell offers the 'ritual body' as a major analytic focus of ritual and "'foremost of all metaphors' for a society's perception and organization of itself.'<sup>9</sup> Bringing the fullness of 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century theories of ritual into a full conversation with the Vigil's history and contemporary practice is not possible in this article, but again, is an area deserving of greater research.

In approaching the Vigil, it is useful to interrogate the ritual structure and aesthetics to gauge the impact of the presence of the body in terms of its illumination of the theological themes expressed in the Rite. The Vigil has the scaffolding provided by the OCF, but the aesthetics of any Vigil, and its likely outcomes, are determined by the community performing the rite. The body as ritual and aesthetic focus in the Vigil, naturally brings us to questions of preparation and care for the body.

In what might be regarded as an unlikely turn of events, the methods of preparation of dead bodies in the modern era was dramatically affected by the American Civil War (1861-1865). The Civil War had soldiers dying far from home, but with the expansion of the railroads around the country, there was a possibility of bringing the dead home for burial, if the body could be sufficiently preserved for the journey. In true American fashion, there were entrepreneurs on the ground to ensure that that possibility could be realised, and an embalming trade was born. Nygard & Reilly note that:

the Civil War wrought, among other things, an increased acceptance in the American mind of the use of embalming and cosmetic restoration in the care of the corpse. In a practical sense, this one particular innovation had perhaps the greatest impact on the role of the family in the care of a deceased loved one, for it necessitated the use of a particular technology possessed, not by family members, but by the professionals of a rapidly expanding funeral trade.<sup>10</sup>

Over the course of the last century, it would seem that our esteem for the 'temples of the Holy Spirit' (1 Cor. 6:19-20 NRSV) which we care for after death, has become contingent upon the body looking less dead and more 'life like', perhaps in order to satisfy a psychological need to avoid irrevocable fact of its death. Perhaps because we have just, over the course of time, accepted this industrial practice as the norm.

There is an immense and ever-growing body of contemporary research on grief and bereavement. Multi-disciplinary scholarly journals have emerged in response to this growing area of research, including *Omega*, *Death Studies*, *Pastoral Care and Counselling*, *Loss Grief and Care*, and *Mortality*. *The Handbook of Death and Dying*<sup>11</sup>, and *The Handbook of*

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6. Davies, 10.

7. Davies, 19.

8. Ibid.

9. Catherine Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, USA, 1992), 73.; Bell quotes; Jonathan Benthall and Ted Polhemus, eds, *The Body as a Medium of Expression* (New York: Dutton, 1975).

10. Paul David Nygard & Catherine H. Reilly, 'The American Family and the Processing of Death Prior to the 20th Century,' in *Handbook of Death and Dying*. ed, Clifton D. Bryant (Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, 2003), 569.

11. Clifton D. Bryant, ed., *Handbook of Death and Dying*. (Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, 2003).

*Thanatology*<sup>12</sup> are two encyclopaedic texts which have condensed much of the contemporary literature in death studies. Both texts take seriously the inextricable links of religion and spirituality to any contemporary investigations of death. Kenneth Doka's article<sup>13</sup> in Volume I of *The Handbook of Death and Dying* charts the history and current state of the 'Death Awareness' movement. Doka asserts that Freud's 1917 essay on mourning and melancholia<sup>14</sup> was the modern genesis of the scholarly arena of death studies. Bert Hayslip, Jr.'s article on death denial<sup>15</sup> charts the history of sociological, anthropological and cultural studies on 'death denial'. It is this inherent human unwillingness to acknowledge death within life, which I contend is discouraging people from planning not only for their own death rituals and rites, but has more generally, seen fewer Catholics participating in the Catholic liturgical practices surrounding death.

Volume II of *The Handbook of Death and Dying - The Response to Death*<sup>16</sup> addresses the appropriation of death and death care by the commercial sphere of the funeral director and the various products and services which have become associated with that industry, whose domain was previously that of the domestic or religious sphere. Morrill expresses this poetically as 'mediating the miraculous in consumer culture'<sup>17</sup> and refers to Vincent Miller's work, *Consuming Religion: Christian Faith and Practice in a Consumer Culture*. Here, Miller asserts that 'promoting Christianity's actual role in the lives of contemporary believers lies not in arguing and presenting doctrinal ideas but rather in analysing and transforming people's life practices'<sup>18</sup>. These practices being 'social actions that have a profound power to form us as persons in ways in which we are not aware'<sup>19</sup>. In a full and self-empowered Vigil, particularly when it is accompanied by the preparation of the body in the home, Christians can bypass some of the aspects of consumer culture in which the mystical and miraculous is overshadowed by the imperatives of economics. There are of course, many parish funeral ministry teams which operate to assist families through the preparation and celebration of the funeral rites. It would be interesting to know how many of these teams are involved in assisting with preparation of the body in the home of the deceased or their family, and with assisting the Vigil to be performed at that time. This is deserving of further research as well as further exploration of the processes and practical interventions for families and individuals who would like to pursue the celebration of the Vigil along with the care of the body at home by friends and family rather than, or in conjunction with commercial providers of funeral services.

### **The Vigil and its Performance in Contemporary Australia**

As we have seen, it is overwhelmingly the rituals of the prevailing culture which determine the ways in which early Christians ritualised the mourning, preparation of the corpse and interment. Rutherford acknowledges the influence of prevailing culture in the experiential faith of early Christians but identifies the 'reciprocal influence that the faith had on the way

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12. David K. Meagher and David E. Balk, eds, *Handbook of Thanatology: the essential body of knowledge for the study of death, dying, and bereavement*, 2nd ed. (New York: New York: Routledge, 2013).

13. Kenneth Doka, 'The Death Awareness Movement: Description, History, and Analysis' in *Handbook of Death and Dying*, ed. Clifton D. Bryant (Thousand Oaks: Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, 2003), 50-55.

14. Doka, 50.

15. Bert Hayslip, Jr, 'Death Denial: Hiding and Camouflaging Death' in *Handbook of Death and Dying*, ed. Clifton D. Bryant (Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, 2003), 34-42.

16. Clifton Bryant ed., *Handbook of Death and Dying*.

17. Morrill, *Divine Worship and Human Healing*, 52; Vincent J Miller, *Consuming Religion: Christian Faith and Practice in a Consumer Culture* (New York: Continuum, 2004).

18 Morrill, 52.

19 Morrill, 52.

those Christians lived their lives'.<sup>20</sup> It is this mutual reciprocity between the Christian liturgical practice and contemporary practices in caring for the dead which will guide my examination of the possibilities for the Vigil and its performance in contemporary Australia.

In exploring the performance of the Vigil in contemporary Australia, I constantly return to and reflect on paragraph 2 of the *Ordo Exsequiarum, 1969, Introduction*:

As they celebrate the funerals of their brothers and sisters, Christians should be intent on affirming their hope for eternal life. They should not, however, give the impression of either disregard or contempt for the attitudes or practices of their own time and place. In such matters as family traditions, local customs, burial societies, Christians should willingly acknowledge whatever they perceive to be good and try to transform whatever seems alien to the Gospel. Then the funeral ceremonies for Christians will both manifest paschal faith and be true examples of the spirit of the Gospel.<sup>21</sup>

This acknowledgement of the influence of time and place on Christian practices is important not only in practical matters pertaining to the rites surrounding death, but also to the psychological approaches to death and bereavement, which feed into our ritualization of the death event in contemporary society.

In exploring its own ideas about its place in the modern world, the Church contends in *Gaudium et spes* (hereafter GS)

It is in the face of death that the riddle of human existence grows most acute. Not only is man tormented by pain and by the advancing deterioration of his body, but even more so by a dread of perpetual extinction. He rightly follows the intuition of his heart when he abhors and repudiates the utter ruin and total disappearance of his own person. He rebels against death because he bears in himself an eternal seed which cannot be reduced to sheer matter. All the endeavours of technology, though useful in the extreme, cannot calm his anxiety; for prolongation of biological life is unable to satisfy that desire for higher life which is inescapably lodged in his breast.<sup>22</sup>

Aligned with this statement from GS, it is proposed that a culture of death denial and death anxiety, has set up complex factors which have contributed to the underperformance of the Vigil within the Catholic faith in Australia.

When commencing investigations into the literature surrounding the performance of the Vigil, I was struck by the large number of works of fiction, poetry, musical works and works of visual art devoted to the theme of Vigil, or using the Vigil as a narrative device, and correspondingly, the relative lack of material specific to the performance of the Vigil in the contemporary Church.

In the years since Vatican II, the instrumental nature of the liturgy has been deemphasised and the spirit of SC, that Christian worship be 'fully conscious, and active participation in liturgical celebrations which is demanded by the very nature of the liturgy'<sup>23</sup> has been the

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20. Rutherford, *The Death of a Christian*, 5.

21. OCF, x.

22. Vatican II Council, *Gaudium et Spes* (hereafter GS), Pastoral Constitution on The Church in the Modern World, Promulgated by His Holiness Pope Paul VI, December 7, 1965, 18.

[http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_const\\_19651207\\_gaudium-et-spes\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html)

23. SC, 14.

focus of liturgical scholarship, ecclesiology and pastoral work<sup>24</sup>. Questions as to whether this ideal of Vatican II is being realised are ongoing<sup>25</sup>. SC encourages a process of discerning the sacred from within the inescapable bounds of the body. The Catholic rites surrounding death, in particular the Vigil, tied as they are to the human bodies, both living and dead, are a fertile area in which to investigate what, in fact, the 'very nature of the liturgy' is.

Rutherford notes in relation to the earliest Christians that 'Belief in the *sacredness of the human body*, the *mystery of Christ's incarnation and resurrection*, and the *resurrection of the dead* traditionally found expression in the care taken to prepare the bodies of the deceased for burial.'<sup>26</sup>

As the Ash Wednesday liturgy reminds us each year, we are called to be present to the end of our mortal existence and contemplative of our eternity, which necessarily entails consideration of those whose mortal lives continue after we are dead. Whilst it may be neither wise nor noble to attempt to control the entirety of our memory in those who remain, it certainly is admirable to communicate to those we will leave behind, the procedures that we wish to be carried out in the immediate aftermath of our death. In Australia, beginning in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, there was a gradual but constant shift away from taking care of the dead at home, towards an industry devoted to the care of the dead which is now worth \$1billion<sup>27</sup>. Most body preparation is carried out in commercial spaces, where cost inevitably plays into the availability of the body to perform each ritual element of the OCF. Firstly, transport is required from the place of death to the commercial mortuary establishment (usually a funeral director), then from the commercial mortuary establishment to the location of the Vigil or viewing, then from the mortuary establishment to the location of the funeral, and finally from the location of the funeral to the place of interment. Additional costs at each of these stages might reasonably be seen as a disincentive for the carrying out of any stage that might be seen as superfluous.

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24. There is an ever-growing body of post Vatican II liturgical scholarship, these texts all address significant areas of study and point to a wide range of associated material Louis Marie Chauvet, *The Sacraments: The Word of God at the Mercy of the Body* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 2001); Anscar J Chupungco, *Handbook for Liturgical Studies: Volume 1: Introduction to the Liturgy* (Collegeville: Liturgical, 1997).; and Anscar J Chupungco, *What, Then, Is Liturgy? Musings and Memoir* (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 2010).; Nathan Mitchell, *Meeting Mystery: Liturgy, Worship, Sacraments* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2006).; Nathan Mitchell, 'Liturgy and the Social Sciences' *American Essays in Liturgy*. (Collegeville: Liturgical, 1999); Keith F. Pecklers, ed. *Liturgy in a Postmodern World* (New York: Continuum, 2003).

25. Godfried Cardinal Danneels, 'Liturgy Forty Years After the Second Vatican Council: High Point or Recession.' McEvoy, James and Maurice P. Hogan, eds. *Mystery of faith: Reflections of the Encyclical Ecclesia de eucharistia*. (Blackrock, Ireland: Columba Press, 2005), 22-42.; Mary Collins, 'Liturgy: Corporate Public Prayer.' *Contemplative Participation: Sacrosanctum Concilium Twenty-five Years Later*. (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1990), 36-48.; Clare V. Johnson, 'Transcending Text: Liturgy as medium of evangelisation 50 years after Vatican II.' *Australian Journal of Liturgy* 13/3 (May, 2013): 100-117.; Jackson, Pamela. 'Sacrosanctum Concilium's Understanding of the Liturgy.' *An Abundance of Graces: Reflections on Sacrosanctum Concilium*. Chicago: Hillenbrand, 2001, 2-9.

26. Richard Rutherford, 'Funeral Rites', 31.

27 Carrington Clarke, 'Invoke dominating funeral industry means customers not getting good deals, academic says' ABC News, 28 Mar 2018, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2018-03-28/critics-claim-a-lack-of-competition-in-funeral-industry/9594044>

There is an irony perhaps, that the Catholic funeral is somewhat of a liturgical flashpoint in the current era, where demands for personalisation and 'celebrations of life' are at odds with the theology of the Christian funeral. The Vigil, however, is viewed by liturgists as a rite which enjoys almost unprecedented pastoral flexibility. When performed together, the Vigil and the Funeral Liturgy can accommodate the participants' requirements for personalisation as well as the ecclesial/liturgical requirements of the Catholic liturgy, in a pastoral success story. Aridas notes that the Vigil is 'an opportunity for family and friends to show their concern by being present during the time of prayer. For those who are unable to attend the funeral mass because of work or other commitments, the Vigil for the Deceased offers the opportunity to pray with the family and to experience the healing power of God's promise as the readings and the prayers are shared'<sup>28</sup>. Aridas confirms that in addition to the formal ritual celebration, it is an important time for stories to be shared, eulogies given, songs sung and poems read.<sup>29</sup>

What we are ultimately hoping to achieve by performing a Vigil also poses ethical questions in relation to the liturgy. Kevin Seasoltz offers a meaningful approach to the liturgy as virtuous act<sup>30</sup>, and it is useful to reflect on the Vigil as ethical liturgy, in a Church which needs to focus more than ever on re-establishing its ethical legitimacy, particularly in an era defined by the horrifying acts of abuse of children and vulnerable members of the Church<sup>31</sup>.

Compassion, consolation, financial equity and ecology are all important ethical considerations raised by the liturgical celebration of the Vigil<sup>32</sup>. Embalming has significant ecological implications<sup>33</sup> and this is something which must be considered as collateral damage from death avoidance.

I believe it is worthwhile investigating the possibilities for death literacy and home death care to improve the performance of the Vigil and exploring the grassroots movements working to increase these practices. Importantly, these grassroots movements are defined by their diversity. They do not arise from a single faith, political or ideological perspective, but a recognised commonality in human mortality, and the myriad ways in which the death event can be approached in contemporary contexts. In an interesting discussion centred on the theology of cremation as preparation of the body, as opposed to committal, John Lampard states, in relation to the washing of the body and other preparations, conducted at a funeral director's offices 'we do not feel the need to attend to watch this, or start again the ancient practice of saying prayers and Psalms as the body is washed.'<sup>34</sup>. Lampard is writing from a Methodist liturgical perspective, but his statement here is one which finds some sympathy

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28. Chris Aridas, *The Catholic Funeral: The Church's Ministry of Hope* (New York, NY: Crossroads Publishing Company, 1998), 27.

29. Aridas, *The Catholic Funeral*, 159.

30. Kevin R Seasoltz, *A Virtuous Church: Catholic Theology, Ethics, and Liturgy for the 21st Century*. (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2012); Stanley Hauerwas, and Samuel Wells. *The Blackwell Companion to Christian Ethics*. 2nd ed. (Blackwell Companions to Religion. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011);

31. Seasoltz, *A Virtuous Church*, 59-60.

32 Robert Shore-Goss, *God is green: an eco-spirituality of incarnate compassion* (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2016).;

Matthew T. Eggemeier, *A Sacramental-Prophetic Vision : Christian spirituality in a suffering world*, (Liturgical Press, 2014).; Jurgen Moltmann, *God in Creation: A New Theology of Creation and The Spirit of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2012.); Sallie McFague, *Blessed are the consumers: Climate Change and the Practice of Restraint* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2012).

33. Johnny Stowe, Elise Vernon Schmidt, and Deborah Green, 'Toxic Burials: the Final Insult,' *Conservation Biology* 15, no. 6 (2001), <https://doi.org/10.1046/j.1523-1739.2001.00348.x>

34. John Lampard, 'Theology in Ashes,' in *Death our future : Christian theology and pastoral practice in funeral ministry*. ed, Peter Jupp (London: Epworth, 2008), 142.

generally, in a world where death is increasingly commodified. Starting again those ancient practices might have some tangible and spiritual benefits in the twenty first century.

*Undertaken with love*<sup>35</sup> is a resource from the United States which provides practical, hands-on information about setting up a home funeral committee within a faith-based or secular organisation. It deals with the practical matters of caring for the body of the deceased at home and refers to a vigil (either religious or secular) as part of the care for the deceased. As the manual states 'It requires a willingness to be something of a pioneer in today's hands-off society, but those who have chosen to reclaim this historical tradition confirm that the process is enormously healing and meaningful'<sup>36</sup>

In Australia, grassroots movements centring around organisations such as The Natural Death Centre<sup>37</sup>, and non-profit funeral directors such as Tender Funerals<sup>38</sup>, are providing encouragement to those who wish to care for their deceased loved ones at home or in a non-profit environment. The Bottom Drawer Book: The After Death Action Plan<sup>39</sup> and *Life is Changed, Not Ended: A Workbook for Preparing a Catholic Funeral*<sup>40</sup>, assist people in planning for their own funerals. Other organisations such as The Groundswell Project<sup>41</sup> and The Order of the Good Death<sup>42</sup> (in America), encourage the removal of taboos around discussing death and planning for death, through workshops, education, art and academic scholarship. These educators and activists attempt to 'de-pathologize' death in a death averse society. They offer reminders that in most cases, a corpse poses no threat to the health of those caring for the body and is not a source of dangerous pathogens.<sup>43</sup>

The time between death and the eventual disposal of the human body by burial or cremation, is a time limited, liminal space. Through workshops and education and destigmatisation of death-talk, Catholics could be empowered not only to plan their own Vigils<sup>44</sup>, but to work together as the Body of Christ in caring for the dead in their communities. In actions of prayer, lamentation, preparation, story-telling, and intimate care for the body of the deceased, we are constructing the very nature of liturgy, an exalted human activity, borne both of necessity and mystical love. It is not just life after our own death that we are hoping to secure through the resurrection theology prayed at the Vigil, it is a continued fullness of life for ourselves in a world which perishes and renews with a relentlessness that constantly threatens to destabilise us.

Is it possible that in the future, Australian parishes can become more accustomed and educated in care for the dead at home, adding to existing funeral ministries? Perhaps

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35 Margalo Eden and Wendy Lyons, eds. T.H.F.M.P. Group, *Undertaken With Love: A Home Funeral Guide for Congregations and Communities*, First ed. (Home Funeral Manual Group, 2009). <https://books.google.com.au/books?id=ywvO6fGgJBcC>.

36. Margalo Eden and Wendy Lyons, *Undertaken with Love*.

37. Natural Death Care Centre, 2017, <http://www.naturaldeathcarecentre.org/>

38. Tender Funerals, <http://tenderfunerals.org/>

39. Lisa Herbert, *The Bottom Drawer Book: The After Death Action Plan*, <https://thebottomdrawerbook.blog/>

40. Tom Elich ed., *Life is Changed, Not Ended: A Workbook for Preparing a Catholic Funeral*, Liturgy Brisbane, 2012.

41. The Groundswell Project, <http://www.thegroundswellproject.com/>

42. The Order of the Good Death, <http://www.orderofthegooddeath.com/>

43. Caitlin Doughty, 'What Remains', End Well Symposium, 6 December, 2018 <https://endwellproject.org/caitlin-doughty-what-remains/>

44. This type of workshop in relation to the preparation and celebration of the funeral liturgy is already facilitated by the ACU Centre for Liturgy - *From death to new life: preparing and celebrating Catholic funerals* <https://www.acu.edu.au/about-acu/institutes-academies-and-centres/acu-centre-for-liturgy/pastoral-training>

dioceses could consider operating small mortuary facilities? These are opportunities to enhance not only ethical liturgy, but equity and social justice issues in accessing funeral services.<sup>45</sup>

### Critical Questions

If we acknowledge that there are now, and will continue to be in the future, Catholic Christians who do not choose a Catholic funeral liturgy for their deceased family member, for the reasons explained in Chapter 4.4, then the Vigil might be the Christian ritual which offers the family of the deceased a realistic place to ritualise the death of a Christian. The absence of a funeral liturgy might not be an ideal model from an ecclesial standpoint but, it may be a path of peace and love where the Body of Christ is nourished by prayer and healing, across the divides of the secular and religious.

Pope Francis' Encyclical *Laudato Si'*<sup>46</sup> calls Catholics to consider our place in creation and the roles and responsibilities that come with being a part of an interconnected web of life. Our rituals, as much as our theology, need to keep this as a touchstone. When we celebrate baptism, we are relying on the purity of the water as much as our prayers of petition. In the disposition of our bodies, there will inevitably be questions to grapple with into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. In what ways will our cemeteries need to change to accommodate an ever-growing urban population? Is it sustainable to chemically treat our dead bodies as a matter of routine? Will it be viable to utilise large amounts of energy to dispose of bodies through burning? Will there be other methods of disposition in the future which will align with the Catholic Christian theologies of the eschaton and eternal life?

I look forward to following these challenges and evolutions in the human world and in the way we ritualise it as Church.

### Reflections

This research has been largely conducted in 2021, the second year of the global COVID-19 pandemic. I had commenced research prior to the pandemic and today, death is being viewed from perspectives that had not been imagined as recently as eighteen months ago.

The ordinary reality that the vast majority of corpses are not dangerous pathogens, and that care of the body at home is not dangerous, was suddenly under threat. The contagious nature of COVID-19 has disallowed both the presence of family and friends at the time of death, as well as in the preparation of, and time spent with the body. The front-line health workers who are tasked with treatment of those infected with COVID-19 have often had to take on the role of chaplain and emotional support, in as much as they can whilst carrying

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45. 'The Cost of Dying', SVA Quarterly, Social Ventures Australia, 26 September 2016, <https://www.socialventures.com.au/sva-quarterly/the-cost-of-dying/>; Australian Securities and Investment Commission, REP 454, Funeral Insurance: A Snapshot, 29 October, 2015, <https://asic.gov.au/regulatory-resources/find-a-document/reports/rep-454-funeral-insurance-a-snapshot/>

46. Francis. '*Laudato Si': On Care for our Common Home*', 24 May 2015 [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco\\_20150524\\_enciclica-laudato-si.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html)

out their professional duties.<sup>47</sup> Government health experts are formulating policy in relation to the handling of bodies by funeral directors on an ongoing basis, as new data is received.<sup>48</sup>

Funeral liturgies and gatherings of family have at various times throughout the pandemic, been severely curtailed as a result of restrictions on gathering to reduce the spread of the virus from person to person. Whilst there is not space here to even begin to analyse the implications of the pandemic on Catholic Christian rituals surrounding death, it would be impossible to conclude this essay without an acknowledgement of this most enormous of upheavals, and to offer up a prayerful hope for healing in this moment and moving forward into the future.

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47. Sally Cloke, 'Behind the COVID Curtain,' *Eureka Street*, 7 May 2020, <https://www.eurekastreet.com.au/article/behind-the-covid-curtain>; Dr Sally Cloke interrogates the impacts of the pandemic on healthcare workers at an early stage in the pandemic.

48. NSW Health, *COVID-19 – Handling of bodies by funeral directors* (Sydney: NSW Government, 6 August 2021), <https://www.health.nsw.gov.au/Infectious/factsheets/Pages/covid-19-funeral-directors.aspx>