Memory, Identity, and Community: A Creatively Faithful Approach to the Formulation of a Theology of Interment

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It is difficult to believe that the issue of cremation was considered to be *verboten* almost a century ago. In 1917, with the promulgation of the first Code of Canon Law, the Church formalized its condemnation of this practice as an extension of the evils of modernism (real or perceived) specifically inspired by affronts to Christian doctrine, especially as evidenced in the traditions of certain secret societies such as Free Masonry. In the Code, the law was clear that Christian burial was required and cremation reprobated, with the sanction that those who pursued the latter option would be denied ecclesiastical burial (cf. c. 1203 and 1240).\(^1\) In 1963, the Sacred Congregation of the Holy Office (now known as the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith) relaxed the prohibition of cremation, noting that it was not intrinsically evil by virtue of its object and that cremation be a valid *exception* yet not the *norm* based upon reasons of “health, economics, or other reasons involving the private or public order,”\(^2\) but never in cases of either explicit or implicit denial of the resurrection of the dead. This change was noted subsequently in the 1983 Code of Canon Law (c. 1176) and the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* [*CCC*] (no. 2301) promulgated in 1992 and welcomed by members of the faithful who found themselves entangled in situations that would have formerly left them liturgically paralyzed at a moment that was already marked by a compounded experience of pain and loss.

Over the last several decades, however, the practice of cremation on the part of faithful Catholics has become much more routine than it is rare. While the change in the official position of the Church clearly viewed cremation as primarily an extraordinary option for the faithful who celebrate the funeral rites in the wake of the death of a loved one, a significant number of Catholics have deviated from this norm. In the United States, limited data exists regarding specifically Catholic practice; however, those who exercise pastoral ministry

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\(^1\) Canon 1203, par. 2: “The bodies of the faithful must be buried, and cremation is reprobated. If anyone has in any manner ordered his body to be cremated, it shall be unlawful to execute his wish; if this order has been attached to a contract, a last will, or any other document, it is to be considered as not added.” Canon 1240: “The following persons are deprived of ecclesiastical burial, unless they had before death, given some signs of repentance: cf. par. 5, persons who have given orders for the cremation of their bodies.” *Translation is mine.*

will attest to similarities in this movement of the celebration of Christian funerals. A 2012 report of the Cremation Association of North America (hereafter, CANA) indicates that the cremation rate was at an alarming 40.3 percent in the United States alone.\(^3\) Even more telling is that a notable number of funeral directors and crematory operators indicate that one of two Americans will choose cremation over burial by 2017.\(^4\) The nubbin of the wide acceptance of this practice is three-fold. First, while official church teaching has advanced clear criteria for the toleration of cremation, there are no sanctions for cases where regulations fail to be followed with the atypical exception of the case of demonstrable denial of resurrection faith, although an understanding of resurrected life is far from consistent and clear on the part of contemporary Catholics. Second, the matter of cremation remains objective and morally neutral while intentions are relatively subjective and unexposed. Third, the ever increasing cost of full funeral services, including the interment of either bodies or cremains, has made the option of cremation almost second nature for many in the poor and middle class.\(^5\)

Therefore, the die is cast as far as inclusion of cremation in Catholic practice both in the United States and around the world given that certain required criteria are met (e.g., economic, geographical, ecological, familial, etc.) and Catholic assent to the doctrine of the resurrection of the body is upheld in earnest.\(^6\) In recent years, however, the even more pressing problem has arisen with regard to the decisions made concerning the treatment of cremains, and finding a final resting place for the ashes of the deceased. Specifically, CANA approximates that only one third of cremains are interred while another third are scattered in various places, and a final third are kept in the family home or some other “safe place.” To the secular eye, the problem would seem to rest with the veritable piecemeal of laws arranged together regarding the location of ashes. This second option is only rarely a difficulty for Catholics since the dissemination of ashes within the environment, regardless of one’s rationale, has been strictly prohibited. A much greater subversive challenge is the failure to inter the cremains, opting instead in favor of locating them in the family home or another predetermined location in a highly visible place of honor. No laws at present regulate or restrict the aforementioned practice, and anecdotal evidence from clergy and other pastoral ministers attests that this option is being exercised with relative frequency.

The question becomes: given the Church’s strong preference for the burial of the deceased, coupled with leniency afforded in permissible scenarios, why would the individuals who take on a key role in the funeral liturgies decide not to inter cremains, which while not physically a corpse still are the deceased, albeit in variant form? The reasons are many and diverse; however, they are easily précised and presented here. Specifically, three elements seem to allow some Catholics the ability to disregard the importance of burial of cremains: failure to be aware of and understand the connection between our burial and Christ’s with particular ignorance of the significance of Jesus’ rest in the tomb on Holy Saturday; a relatively innocent yet serious misunderstanding of the nature of the resurrection of the body and virtual ignorance of the symbolic theological role of interment in resurrection; and finally a need to be proximate to the deceased in order to experience an abiding presence of their loved ones. This catalogue of reasons seems to challenge the hope characteristic of future life with God and requires a corrective. The present essay will attempt to offer something of a remedial and creatively faithful theological catechesis regarding each of the three aforementioned deficiencies with the hope of providing the groundwork for a theology of interment of cremains rooted in the Catholic Tradition.

The principal strands of argument in favor of the interment fall under three general headings: Memory, Identity, and Community, each of which will be examined in turn. Generally speaking, memory refers to recalling the importance of the actual burial of the Lord, which is only complete when viewed vis-à-vis the transforming mystery of Holy Saturday. Identity refers to the nature of the resurrected body and the symbolic importance of the tomb in the completion of the transition to full humanity through the departure from time to arrival at the universal experience of eternity. Third, community gives witness to the fact that the deceased has arrived at a fuller connection with the entire communion of saints, providing far more consolation than an urn engraved and enshrined in the home. Creatively faithful theological reflection upon each of these realities to varying degrees will augment and perhaps surpass the Church’s current articulation of the importance of the burial (with significant attention to the ashes of the deceased) based upon reverence and respect for the future resurrection with little elucidation or nuance having been provided specifically in terms of the theological purpose of interment.7

Memory

The Burial of Jesus

Relatively little organized treatment of the burial of Jesus has been pursued in academic literature with the exception of limited biblical commentaries and ancillary treatment in investigations of the historical Jesus and Jewish funerary practices. Even there, much of the information remains somewhat shrouded and selectively presented. One fact to which the aforementioned studies attest is that in investigating the burial of Jesus for the development of a theology of interment that can be extended even to cremains, it is important to begin by examining the funerary practices and rituals of the Jews and Christians in early Roman Palestine that shared a common ethnicity.8

The importance of interment is first underscored by the insistence that Jewish funerals normatively occur immediately following death, usually on the same day. The prescribed preparations were made immediately upon death and the corpse was processed to the place of interment, accompanied by family and friends, where it was placed in a subterranean chamber in the tomb by the immediate family. Generally the trek to the tomb was protracted since graves were located no closer than the outer edge of the village for the purpose of the maintenance of ritual purity.9 Upon physical interment, public lamentation, the delivery of eulogies, and the placement of personal artifacts would follow. Funeral rituals did not end here; however, for rituals to returning to and mourning at the tomb lasted anywhere from thirty days to one full calendar year, given the nature of one’s familial relationship to the deceased.10 After one year had passed, a second burial occurred when the bones of the departed were gathered and placed in ossuaries and reburied in the tomb. While little is known of the purely religious or theological significance of these practices, they speak volumes in regard to ancient Jewish social perspectives and structures. As noted by Bryron R. McCane,

The funerary ritual of Jews in early Roman Palestine gave symbolic prominence to two cultural life values: kinship and ritual purity. As an expression of Jewish ethnicity, burial practices in this region and period were laden with symbolic representations of family and piety. Kinship relations were celebrated in the rituals of primary burial, mourning, and secondary burial…Ritual purity was valorized in the location of tombs…For the Jews in this region and period, and the highest good in life was to be found in a set of relationships among family members and their God. They lived and died as if their ultimate

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7 United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, “Cremation and Corporeal Burial.”
9 McCane, Roll Back the Stone, 55–56.
10 McCane, Roll Back the Stone, 55–56.
responsibility was to love the Lord their God with all their heart and soul and mind and strength, and their neighbor as themselves.¹¹

Thus, interment affirmed the full humanity of the dead through the ritualized celebration of the two primary relationships that virtually defined their existence. It is in this context that the burial of Jesus must be examined and evaluated.

To begin to determine the significance of the burial of Jesus for a theology of interment it is important to authenticate its occurrence. Turning to the New Testament, its certainty is well attested. To begin, in the ancient creedal formula of 1 Corinthians 15:3-4, the fact that Jesus was buried is one of the four central tenets of the Paschal Mystery communicated in the evangelization of new Christians.¹² Also, the fact that the burial of Jesus is presented in each of the four canonical gospels adds to its legitimacy. What becomes somewhat troublesome is that historically, this is where objective data ends—namely the occurrence of the burial. It is widely attested in modern exegetical studies that virtually every detail of Jesus’ burial is greatly embellished and even improved upon with each subsequent gospel’s reporting of it. In terms of embellishment, the Gospel of John for example conveys that Jesus was buried with one hundred pounds of spices. Given the standard dimensions of a single tomb however, such an amount would have crushed the corpse under the mound.¹³ In regard to progressive exaggeration of Jesus’ interment, the theological signatures of each evangelist become more detailed with each account.¹⁴

Despite the evangelists’ best efforts, however, one fact in the burial narrative remains strikingly clear: it is unmistakably obvious that the burial of Jesus is shameful in light of the established Jewish funerary practices of the time. In all the accounts, regardless of their laundering or embellishment, two constitutive characteristics of dishonorable burial remain, namely, no mention of either a family tomb and no formal ritual of mourning (i.e., no procession, no eulogies, no placement of personal effects, no public lamentation).¹⁵ When these missing elements are taken in conjunction with the purposeful orchestration by the Jewish authorities, in collaboration with the Romans, to bury Jesus as a condemned criminal in an unmarked grave, the event of Jesus being laid to rest clearly becomes a patent event of shame.¹⁶

At the level of the gospel narratives, it would seem that the dishonorable burial of Jesus provides little if any weight to the development of an expedient theology of interment given Jesus’ wretched and pitiable experience. Assessment of the positive value of the experience would be a charge for later theology to undertake. Thus, in order to assess the importance proposed by the present study, one must see the occasion through a metaphysical lens—as a segue to Holy Saturday, the experience between the cross and resurrection that solidifies Jesus’ solidarity with and redemption of humanity.

Holy Saturday

For many, it will appear difficult to make the connection between the theological significance of interment and the mystery of Holy Saturday since the theological tradition seems virtually to have passed over it, treating it no less definitively than the author of the fourth gospel who in all of his theological sophistication gives it barely a

11 McCane, Roll Back the Stone, 56.
14 See McCane, Roll Back the Stone, 101.
15 McCane, Roll Back the Stone, 102.
16 McCane, Roll Back the Stone, 106.
mention. For the purposes of the present inquiry, given its limitation of time and space, two related yet distinct theological insights will be considered briefly. Each contributes to the argument that through anamnesis of the meaning of Holy Saturday its usefulness for the present is refined and thus advocates for the unquestionable importance of the consignment of bodily remains to the earth as a virtually compulsory component of Christian funerary practice.

The first insight evolves from an ecclesial context, specifically the ruminations of Benedict XVI on the occasion of his pastoral visit to Turin and his veneration of the Holy Shroud. Here the pope refers to Holy Saturday as “no-man’s land” where in this “time-beyond-time, Jesus Christ descended to the dead.” He interprets these words to convey that God incarnate, on entering and remaining in the tomb, united himself with humanity’s most profound and dismal solitude, devoid of love and comfort, a proverbial and veritably indomitable “hell.” Through this tarry in the tomb, endured solely for love of all humanity, Benedict asserts that Jesus Christ transcended this ultimate sentence of seclusion, bringing all believers, past, present, and future with him. Thus, his hallowed tomb became more of a point of transition than an otherworldly penitentiary, for it became the place where love, fully mired in the abyss of death, at the command of the voice of God, would galvanize the Spirit to raise Jesus from the dead. For the pope, Holy Saturday, the odium of the tomb, has become a night marked by the seeding of the cosmic garden with love that allows the new hope of Resurrection to germinate and mature. He concludes that this experience, having been assumed by Christ, applies to all humanity and appears to suggest that all subsequent experiences of the tomb prepare believers to arise anew with the One who is the cause and model of human resurrection.

Turning to the world of more formal academic theology, Anthony Kelly grounds his consideration of the final acts of the drama of the Christ event in a comprehensive treatment of eschatology grounded in the paschal mystery. Accordingly, he devotes a brief yet powerful section of his work, *Eschatology and Hope*, to the mystery of Holy Saturday. His reflections manifest an incredible conformity with those of Benedict XVI. He too speaks of Christ’s solidarity with humanity, sinking to the lowest of possible depths, a solitude that “connotes that limit of God-forsakenness at which no human hope is possible” so that through solidarity in death humanity may know existentially the fullness of life. It is within the bowels of the earth that Christ reveals the “all-embracing love of the Father and embodies the creativity of the Holy Spirit moving with inexhaustible vitality even at the depths of darkness and defeat.” It is almost for Kelly as if Paradise is revisioned and restored through love that is both economic and immanent, resulting in the complete obliteration of primordial “aloneness.”

Kelly’s theological addition is discovered in his equation of Christ’s solidarity with the dead in the tomb with the manifestation of God’s limitless mercy. God’s sending his Son into the tomb signifies God’s reaching out to all sinners including, and especially, those who distance themselves from God by means of self-imposed isolation, thereby joining himself with humanity in its greatest distraction and desolation, making the consolation of libera-

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19 Benedict XVI, *Veneration of the Holy Shroud*.
20 Benedict XVI, *Veneration of the Holy Shroud*. This conclusion serves as an extension of the solidarity between Jesus and humanity.
22 Kelly, *Eschatology and Hope*, 90.
23 This Paradise is not that found in the mythical Eden, but rather the enduring relational serenity promised to the repentant thief addressed by Jesus on the cross (cf. Lk 23:43).
24 Kelly, *Eschatology and Hope*, 90.
tion from death and hopelessness universal existential possibility. This does not suggest that one is compelled to be saved, for this action on the part of Christ is by no means a limitation of human freedom. More accurately, according to Kelly, it is the hopeful and ultimate rival of ultimate perversion.\textsuperscript{25} Clearly then, Christ's hiatus in the tomb is neither a sign of divine defeat nor imposed salvation. Rather, it is the final soteriological movement of divine benevolence and compassion aggressively extended to all. For Kelly, it appears that Holy Saturday has become a fountain of redemptive hope complementing perfectly the final prayers of the Church which invoke the clemency of the One who creates and calls all humanity to return to Himself.

The consequences of the interval between cross and resurrection for the formulation of the theology of interment are profound and pressing. Memory of Jesus' burial sets the stage for the suffering of ultimate aloneness through his own shameful interment. The grave is the universal sign of seclusion for humanity. In the depths of earth, Jesus symbolically assumes solidarity with humanity in its final solitude and transforms it. In his trans-historical linkage with humanity, human persons are fitted for a new relational and resurrected existence. Thus, the universal extension of God's mercy present in the dynamic encounter of Holy Saturday is made real when it is remembered liturgically through the rites of interment.\textsuperscript{26} It may be argued then that interment of the person can ascend from the status of personal option to that of theological necessity.

Identity

A second justification for the proposal of a universally applicable theology of interment falls under the heading of Identity. By virtue of the term, anyone vaguely familiar with the contours of Catholic eschatology can assume that the proposed identity is that of the resurrected person. To understand the import of the risen person, the nature of resurrected existence must be clarified and nuanced. This venture is not new for theology, for questions regarding this new “state of being” have been a part of Christian theological speculation since the late writings of the Apostle Paul, where, specifically in 1 Corinthians 35-44, he speaks to the nature of the risen body invoking the aid of an imaginary interlocutor to respond to members of the Hellenistic community about the veracity of the resurrection. He employs a number of analogies drawn from the realm of everyday experience. It has been noted that these analogies fall under three headings: agricultural, zoological, and astronomical (cf. 15:36-41).\textsuperscript{27} In so doing, he does not offer great specificity. He does appear however, to insist upon “radical change within continuity.”\textsuperscript{28} Since that time, speculation of the nature of the resurrected body has produced a voluminous amount of proposals.

At this point, it is important to recall that two issues are almost always presumed in discussions of the resurrected body, namely the identity of the risen person and the characteristics of the risen body.\textsuperscript{29} With regard to the second, popular notions of the resurrected body have tended to focus issues ranging from upon material continuity to supernatural characteristics of glorified bodies.\textsuperscript{30} Present popular theologies advance ideas regarding the resurrected body as perfectly attuned to the risen state in age, beauty and perfection.\textsuperscript{31} Yet for all of these elaborate and fanciful aspirations about the perfection of the present body, for the majority of the seventy percent of Americans who do

\textsuperscript{25} Kelly, Eschatology and Hope, 91.
\textsuperscript{26} For an example of the reifying power of liturgical memory, see, Thomas P. Rausch, Eschatology, Liturgy, and Christology: Toward Recovering and Eschatological Imagination (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2012), 26-27.
\textsuperscript{27} Collins, First Corinthians, 562-568.
\textsuperscript{28} Rausch, Eschatology, Liturgy, and Christology, 82.
\textsuperscript{29} Peter C. Phan, Response to 101 Questions on Death and Eternal Life (New York: Paulist Press, 1997), 99.
\textsuperscript{30} Four common characteristics included Impassibility, or freedom from all suffering; Subtlety, or the ability to pass though solid objects; Splendor that is shining with great luminosity or resplendence; and Agility, unbound by the laws of nature. See, Thomas Aquinas, Supplement, Summa Theologicae, qq. 82-85.
\textsuperscript{31} See, for example, Randy Alcorn, Heaven (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers), 2008.
believe in the afterlife, “their idea of life beyond death is vague and undefined, more a cultural idea about spiritual survival than something based in on the biblical idea of resurrection of the body and all its implications.”

In the modern era, it is not only the fanciful speculation of the past, but the insights of scientific theory in the present that detract from holding to a firm belief in physical, bodily resurrection. When coupled with the considerations of modern philosophy and theology; however, a more palatable presentation of the resurrections may be presented. The argument is well attested in current literature and need only be summarized here with particular attention to the work of Gerald O’Collins. He begins with the clear assertion of Irenaeus that the dead rise “certainly with the same body in which they died; otherwise those who rise would not be the same persons who died previously,” and proceeds to discuss the contemporary view of bodily sameness.

The periodic interchange of matter with the environment calls to question whether it is accurate to speak of persons being or possessing the same body throughout the whole course of their earthly existence. In the ongoing process of bodily evolution, matter is shed and steadily replaced with almost a complete change in atoms and molecules in a period of seven years. O’Collins indicates that some have argued that the unique genetic structure of persons, inherent in their DNA does in fact maintain the same body in life; however, through bodily decay or cremation after death, physical remains are disseminated into the environment, which recasts the question of bodily continuity between the present and risen life. His response is to note the connection between one’s physical body and one’s history. Through bodiliness, persons develop in all of their fundamental human relationships. It is through the freedom that characterizes these relationships that one establishes a “personal history” and thus human persons become “embodied histories” which provides the possibility of “understanding our particular, embodied history being raised from the dead.” Resurrected persons are therefore transformed to express the bodily persons they matured into during the course of their earthly lives. In this proposal, O’Collins substantiates Irenaueus’ view through his summary assertion that ”The same resurrected history means the same resurrected body.”

What has the affirmation of the aforementioned presentation of resurrection as the transformation and completeness of the individual into glorified personal selfsameness have to do with the interment of corpses or cremains? The key may be found in the assertion that the preservation and perfection of personal selfsameness occurs only, as noted by Bernard Prusak “when the final note has be written and played” in the final consummation. In words, when understood in a narrative and personalist cast, resurrection of the dead cannot be said to occur at the end of an individual’s concrete history that had transpired on this side of the grave. Rather, it occurs at the Parousia or Second Coming, an idea that has been aligned closely with the Catholic Tradition. It is only then that the embodied history of individual persons, along with the corresponding collective human history, comes to know fully life with Christ.

Resurrection “on the last day” adds yet another dimension to the full resolution of the human narrative. Since there exists, in time as perceived by human persons, a period between individual death and personal fulfillment of the collective human narrative in the “resurrection of the body,” the existence of the intermediate state as being part of the revealed eschatological truth explicated by the Church and theologians is a logical consequence. While a num-

38 *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1001. See text at http://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/__P2H.HTM.
ber of theologians have dismissed this state in favor of immediate resurrection. Official church doctrine as well as a significant number of eschatologists continue to maintain their belief in it. Theological justification for the intermediate state is necessary in order to continue to argue for its veracity and helpfulness for the development of a theology of interment. For the current theological project, the existence of this state is key, especially since it corresponds roughly with the time when the grave is occupied by the body or its cremains. The only logical appeal appears to the existence and nature of purgatory.

Given the parameters of the current undertaking, only a proposal regarding the “time” associated with Purgatory will prove essential. For many, temporal duration has made little sense, speaking of a moment of purification and perfect contrition in the personal encounter with God that takes place in death. On the other hand, the concept of purgatory having a historical duration seems to make much more sense if the extensive appeal to resurrection of the body as the preservation and perfection of one's embodied history is to be taken seriously. In this purview, purgatory is seen as “a new, compassionate relationship with the history of the world adversely affected by our failures in love” noting that “we cannot be completely in heaven as long as our sin-affected history continues.” The process of maturation, purification, and integration through exercises of embodied freedom that lacked completeness in life are fulfilled through a final period of conversion and reform in the final movement from time to eternity. This movement in “time” has been described rightly as a “dance” that is led by the Lord, of unknown duration, yet presumably one in direct proportion to the intensity of fragmentation that affects the fundamental relationships into which the human person entered during life.

Having established identity of the resurrected person as the purified and perfect selfsameness that co-exists with the Lord for eternity, it is relatively simple to articulate the symbolic theological importance of interment of remains whether a corpse or cremated remains. Returning to the concept of the memory of Holy Saturday, Anthony Kelly had suggested that to remember the interment of Christ was to remember his universal offer of clemency. The grave then became a sign of the ultimate mercy of God available to all people. In exploring the contours of the resurrection of the dead, once having transitioned completely from time to eternity, it became clear the perfection of the embodied narrative of the self would require a period of ontological and existential ablution. Resurrection and final redemption would occur at great cost and include the all of the virtues incarnated and choices made in the embodied narrative of the person brought to perfection. The intensity of this final historical soteriological movement almost escapes the imagination, for as noted by John Thiel, “Salvation, becoming who [we] most are, to some degree entails becoming who [we] were not—persons broken by their sin and the sin of others.” Further, the affirmation of bodiliness in resurrection, the absolute and complete integrity of the redeemed person, “means that our relationality continues and that the work of the blessed dead might include ongoing reconciliation and forgiveness.”

Given the intensity and comprehensive breadth of the purgative experience, its duration must be far more than immediate from the human perspective, for ontological deconstruction of embodied and fragmented relationships

42 Kelly, *Eschatology and Hope*, 130.
requires a free choice for healing that accompanies final orientation of the fundamental option to the fullness of life and love that is God himself.

Interment serves as a profound theological symbol of the final orientation and its subsequent engagement in purification. As symbol it serves a dialectical purpose, for although the grave is not the theological and ontological prelude to the resurrection of the body, in some mysterious manner, it makes the purgative overture present both as a reality for the deceased and a sign for those who remain in the present. Committing one's remains to the earth, whether a corpse or cremains in the tomb one has clearly descended to the realm of the dead in imitation of Christ. Rather than being a prison however, the tomb is now the place of encounter of the unbounded mercy of God. Additionally, it becomes the chamber of purification, the sign of the final commitment to be freed from those vestiges of relational imperfection such as fear, loneliness, anger, uncertainty, and the like. These vulnerabilities, having remained unresolved in life, led one to sin in life presenting scars so deep that although they were acknowledged and addressed by sacramental reconciliation, they were not fully healed. Interment in the grave provides a symbolic safe environment. Just as it serves as the final resting place of Sabbath for remains before they are caught up in the resurrection of personal selfsameness at the end of time, the intermediate state also provides unwavering security, for the ultimate destiny of the deceased cannot be changed, but rather expedited through the final act of divine compassion. Interment then represents the entry into the final state of existence for one's embodied narrative, the final commitment of God ultimately realized in the final symbol of it, lulling persons either anatomical or ash to a rest cushioned in faith, blanketed in hope, and drawn in love for all eternity.

Community: A Brief Note on the Renewal of the Importance of Acknowledgement of the Communion of Saints for Those Who Mourn

The theological importance of interment is not only to be found in a renewed appreciation of bodily resurrection, but in the pastoral theological movements of consolation and compassion. Anecdotal evidence maintains that a significant number of mourners have opted to allow the ashes of the departed to remain in their homes. Their motivation is pure enough, seeing that it is grounded in grief that results from loss of a relative or friend with whom one entered a relationship framed in the context of the love command of Jesus. The location of remains of the deceased in the home assures the mourner of the continued presence of the departed in their homes and in their lives through a visual cue inspired by material stimulus, that is, cremains.

This posture is wrought with both theological difficulties rooted in contemporary culture and deficiencies in evangelization on the part of the Church. As regards the former, modern individuals are hard pressed to respond anything but to immediate stimuli. Although risking classification as cliché, this disposition is largely the result of the advancements of technology and the ability for instant gratification in a number of areas. Here generation Y, or “millennials” are particularly guilty. Only that which is readily accessible seems real to a vast majority of individuals even if they believe in an afterlife. Such a disposition unfortunately is a cultural contagion and will only be corrected by the return to values rooted in vicarious experiences with no direct, observable, or measureable assessment. A more helpful remedy may be to address the spiritual deficiencies that result from a poor evangelization in a central yet often overlooked tenet of the faith, namely the theology of the communion of saints.

The theology of the communion of saints presents a powerful symbol of the presence of the dead among us. Unfortunately, although completely accurate, the formal ecclesial explication of this communion seems still far removed

from the lived experience of believers. The Catechism continues to use the traditional distinct and separate categories of the church militant, suffering and triumphant albeit in less formal language. With regard to the Communion with the dead, the emphasis is placed on the ministry of “intercession” which is bi-directional and oriented toward perfection and assistance that is either proximate or eternal. Although this focus is, again important, principled, and reliable, what becomes problematic is that this imagery fails to existentially appeal to generation Y, for as noted by Daniel Horan, “Millennials hunger to be connected to something larger than themselves,” a trait that serves as a connecting point for young adults seeking a spirituality that is far from individualistic. The same may be said of the members of Generation Y (X and Z as well) who attempt to navigate the theology of death, when faced with the passing of one that they love deeply. In order to bring closure to their mourning with clear assurance of the abiding presence of the deceased through full participation in funeral rituals including interment of remains, a theology of the community of saints must evolve in a creatively faithful manner marked by a certain degree of tangibility.

Elizabeth Johnson provides a contemporary theology of the communion of saints that may just serve as an effective response to the aforementioned lacuna. For her, the communion of saints is “an inclusive community of friends of God and prophets…accessed through memory and hope.” Thus her reflections are noetic rather than pious and rooted in anamnesis more than physical proximity. She continues that

Together the living form with the dead a community of memory and hope, a holy people touched with the fire of the Spirit, summoned to go forth as companions bringing the face of divine compassion into everyday life and the great struggles of history, wrestling with evil and delighting even now when fragments of justice, peace, and healing gain however small a foothold. When they are seen together with the whole natural world as a dynamic, sacred community or the most amazing richness and complexity, the symbol of the communion of saints reaches its fullness as a symbol of effective presence and action of Holy Wisdom herself.

Three insights may be gained from these observations when contemplating the importance of the interment of remains in light of the need for the faithful to experience a sound connection with the deceased. First, it highlights the communion of saints as a community of hope, a body that shares in the patent love of God that speaks to the mutual presence of all who are invested in it, a presence that surpasses the mere possession and proximity of human remains or even human memories. Second, the communion of saints incarnates divine compassion, a desire that the living express in all of the funeral rites, with special attention to the final interment where in trust the deceased is figuratively handed over first to God and secondly to the rest of the heavenly community each of whom aids the deceased in the process of purification that is characteristic of the intermediate state. Third, it testifies that God, in engaging all creation, is not a God of the dead, but of the living, namely those who are called to fullness of life with him. Therefore, abiding presence of the deceased is assured when the present physical existence of persons is brought to closure through Christian burial. Thus, interment, which calls to mind the cloud of witnesses, provides solace and comfort and even joy to those who once lamented their dead and through domestic enshrinement of them run the risk of remaining there, needing a visible sign of their continued existence mistakenly rooted in the past and neglecting the invitation to witness their passage to a hope-filled eschatological future.

48 Cf. CCC, no. 962. See text at http://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/__P2B.HTM.
50 See note 47.
52 Johnson, Friends of God and Prophets, 243.
Conclusion

The categories of memory, identity and community, with special attention to cremains that attempts to initially engage the mysteries of Holy Saturday, the Resurrection of the Dead and the Intermediate State, and the Communion of Saints, are far from routine headings under which discussions of the theological importance of the interment of the dead falls. On an intellectual level, the present investigation has attempted to utilize the grammar of eschatology to assist those who seek to understand the theological importance of Christian burial as part of Catholic funerary practice. In a pastoral level, it attempts to provide substantial motivation for those who opt for cremation to understand the status of cremains in the resurrection of the dead with the hope of inspiring a change of heart on those who would otherwise elect to retain the remains of their loved ones as something of a personal possession. For the author, it has been an initial exercise in refining personal insight into theological anthropology rooted firmly in Christology in anticipation of its future manifestation through encouragement of the fullest possible participation in the Paschal Mystery liturgically. It is proposed merely as the beginning of a dialogue aimed at further illuminating those eschatological truths related to the first of the “Four Last Things” contained in the deposit of faith.