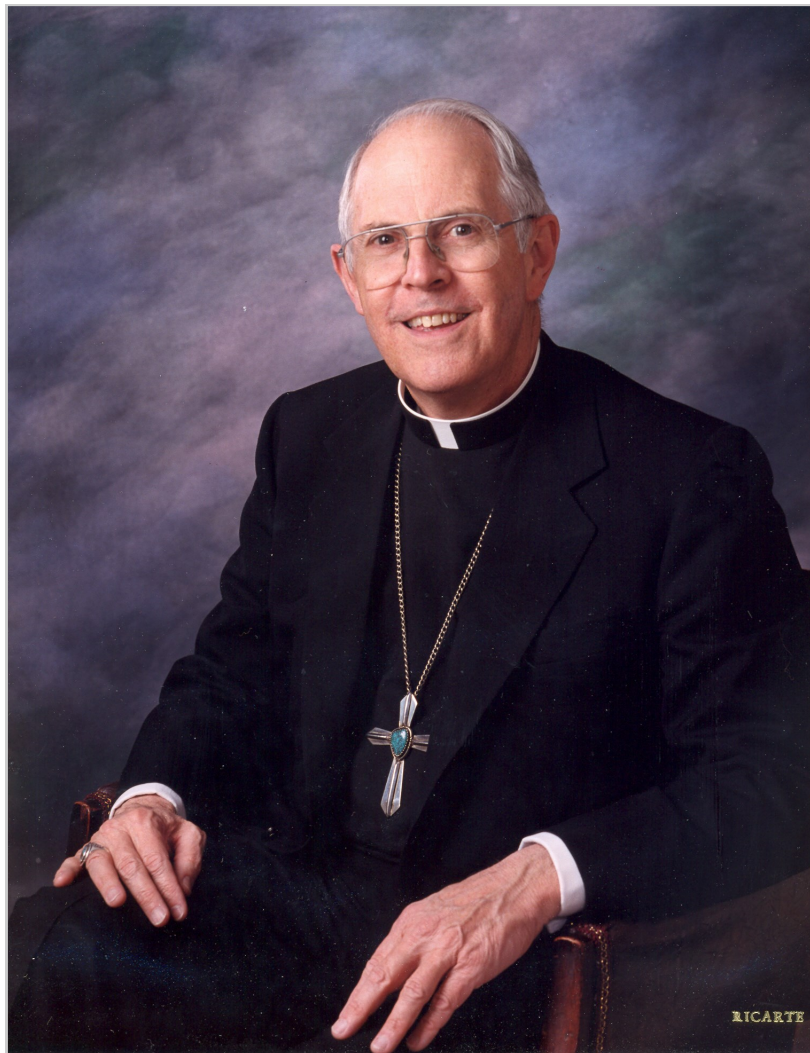


To Honor The Dead

A Pastoral Letter to the People of God from
Archbishop Michael J. Sheehan



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Written on All Souls' Day November 2, 1997

INTRODUCTION

All Souls Day - November 2, 1997

The reality of death is one that every human being faces. During the month of November, the Church remembers the dead in a special way as it celebrates the Feasts of All Saints and All Souls. These celebrations afford the opportunity to reflect upon the mystery of death. In our secular society there seems to be a growing uncertainty about a truly Christian understanding of death. I offer my pastoral guidance and clarification on this issue and the beliefs and practice of our Catholic faith.

THE DIGNITY OF HUMAN LIFE AND THE CATHOLIC TEACHING ON DEATH

The Book of Genesis tells us that God made the human person in His own image and likeness. The Church teaches that each person is unique and unrepeatable, and every person must be respected because of his or her human dignity as a child of God; as this is true in life, so too in death.

As human life ebbs out of a dying body, we believe that the person's soul continues to live forever. As people of faith, we pray that God will bring the souls of our beloved dead into the eternal happiness of heaven and that they will escape the everlasting darkness of hell. Those who die with lesser sins on their souls and are imperfectly purified, require the cleansing of purgatory. Their souls can benefit from the prayers of the faithful on earth. In the Second Book of Maccabees in the Old Testament, we read that "it is a holy and pious thought to pray for the dead." We therefore pray for them, asking God to bring them quickly into His presence. But how terrible to die in mortal sin, without repenting and accepting God's merciful love. This would mean being separated from God forever by one's own free choice and choosing eternal death which is hell. The supreme goal of our life is our eternal salvation. If we lose our soul, all is lost. How important it is to live and die in God's grace and friendship so that we can be perfectly purified and live forever with Him and the saints in heaven. The souls of the just will experience the resurrection of Jesus and the joy He brings. This is the teaching of both Scripture and tradition, going back 2,000 years and reaffirmed in the Catechism of the Catholic Church.

We are to do the best we can to live in God's friendship, nourished by the Mass, the sacraments, regular prayer, concern for the poor, and by living a decent Christian life. If we regularly ask God's forgiveness for our sins and failings and seek to live with respect for our brothers and sisters, we know we need not fear our death and what lies beyond. We must seek to live always in the state of grace and we pray for the grace of final perseverance, thus enabling us to live as we believe God wants us to live and to die in His love.

We pray for the grace of a happy death fortified by the anointing of the sick, absolution, and Holy Communion. However, if death is near and the sacraments are not available, one can at least make a fervent act of contrition. God, just and all-loving judge that He is, will not abandon us. The most hardened sinner can repent in a moment, and the holiest person can have serious failings that require our prayers and the prayers of the Church. We pray for all who have died that they might have eternal life.

These teachings have profound implications in our age of materialistic values and weak faith. If human life is of little value, then the dead body has little value as well. Since human life is sacred and to be treated with dignity, then after death, the human remains must be afforded every respect and dignity as well.

CHRISTIAN TRADITIONS AND THE CATHOLIC CEMETERY

The Christian tradition has always been to extend not only physical care to the sick and dying, but spiritual care as well. Not only does the Church instruct that pastoral care be provided for the dying, but also for the family and loved ones. Our priests, deacons, hospital staff and chaplains bring all their pastoral efforts to ministering to the dying, ministering with sensitivity and respect and affording proper dignity due to the body.

After death occurs, the body is to be treated with respect in all aspects that lead to preparation for burial. The rites of the dead are filled with hope as the vigil services and a funeral liturgy are celebrated. A conscious effort should be made by all to reach out to family and friends of the deceased offering consolation and love at the time of death and, as grieving follows afterwards. Masses and prayers should continue to be offered for the happy repose of the soul of the deceased.

In the Archdiocese of Santa Fe, we have three perpetual care Catholic cemeteries and a countless number of other parish cemeteries. Our cemeteries should be well maintained to show respect for the dead buried there. A Catholic family should seek to be buried in the consecrated ground of a Catholic cemetery which is a place of prayer and spiritual healing and a place to show respect for deceased relatives and ancestors. I encourage the faithful, especially in the month of November, to pay special homage and offer prayers at the graves of their loved ones.

Our Catholic faith and Catholic traditions are for us a consolation in accepting the reality of death!

A CARING MINISTRY

Families, parishes, hospitals, funeral homes, and cemeteries all share in one of the most profound moments of life. I direct our priests and deacons and all Catholics engaged in these related ministries to collaborate in providing care and comfort to the sick, the dying, and the grieving, and providing services and support to families in those difficult times. In cases of terminal illness, families should not hesitate to use the services of hospice through which nursing and specialized care are provided. The caring ministries need to be supportive from the time of diagnosis through the days that follow at the bedside of the dying, at the grave, and finally to the heart of the grieving home.

The family, too, must be conscious of its role. Their presence and care of loved ones is essential. Families should not hesitate to contact the parish priest or hospital chaplain when a loved one is seriously ill to assure that the anointing of the sick will be provided. When death occurs, the family should contact the pastor immediately for guidance and for assistance in planning the funeral liturgy and burial.

Families, hospitals, funeral homes, and cemetery staff need to understand the Christian meaning of life and death.

***WE KNOW NOT
THE DAY NOR THE HOUR***

All too often we fail to prepare for our own death or that of a loved one. We seem to leave the inevitable to the responsibility of someone else. As Christians who believe in life everlasting and the dignity of the person, it is most fitting that we look at death as friend rather than an enemy. Since we know not the day nor the hour, it behooves us to plan ahead.

All are encouraged to become familiar with the Church's teaching on life support and palliative care. Catholic ethical teaching allows for extensive use of pain medicine and does not require any artificial means of continuing life. Since God is the author of life, the Church forbids the taking of life through euthanasia or assisted suicide. There is a world of difference between *allowing* someone to die naturally and *killing* them!

Talk about the care that you hope to receive should you be stricken by a serious illness or as death draws near. Be aware also of the care that family members desire for themselves. Such conversation and preparation, including advance directives, removes the burden of difficult decisions that are often left to family members. Unfortunately, when advance planning has not taken place, the family members may experience struggle and dissention regarding the care of their loved one. It is important, too, to make a will to minimize the problems for your family.

The same holds true for funeral arrangements. Look into the kinds of services, pre-arrangements and plans available before they are needed. It is much easier to make reasonable decisions before one faces the pain of loss of a loved one. Proper respect for the dead is shown not in the cost of the funeral but rather in the faith and respect which family friends and others bring to the funeral.

CATHOLIC FUNERALS

All too often people say, "Funerals are for the living, not for the dead." For a Catholic such a statement is woefully incomplete. Rather, a Catholic funeral affords an opportunity to praise and thank God for the love and mercy He has shown the deceased person. The funeral is a time to pray for the repose of the soul of the departed, and to offer consolation to family and friends. The Scripture readings remind those present of the promise of life eternal to those who are faithful and believe. The celebration of the Eucharist is the heart of the funeral. The funeral Mass, which concludes with the promise of hope in Jesus Christ and belief in the resurrection of the dead, is appropriately followed by the proper Christian burial. In the absence of a priest, a deacon may preside at the funeral.

The long standing practice of reverently burying the body of the deceased in a grave or placing it in a mausoleum, in imitation of the burial of Jesus' body, continues to be encouraged by the church. Burial of the body is the preferred way of honoring the dead.

Some families have abandoned the practice of having a Catholic Funeral Rite for the deceased. It is very unfortunate and improper when the body of the dead person is disposed of without prayer for their immortal souls. This approach indicates an erosion in our belief about the hope of eternal life, about death, and respect for the human person.

CONCERNING CREMATION

Cremation, once not permitted for Catholics, is now allowed provided that the remains will be reverently buried or placed in a mausoleum. The practice of cremation is being chosen by a significant number of families for a variety of reasons including economy and practicality. It is recommended that cremation take place after the funeral liturgy so that the body can be present for the full course of funeral rites. This can be done in a manner that does not require excessive cost.

The Church recently approved allowing the cremated remains to be brought into the church to be present for the vigil, the funeral and the rite of committal, and has prepared appropriate prayer texts to be used in these instances.

When a funeral Mass is said with the body present, the coffin is covered with a pall. When cremated remains are present, the instructions for the liturgy indicate that the remains are to be contained in a “worthy vessel” and put on a table or stand in the place normally occupied by the coffin. The vessel is not to be covered with a pall. The vessel containing the cremated remains may be carried to its place in the entrance procession or may be placed on a table or stand sometime before the liturgy begins. The Easter candle may be situated alongside the cremated remains, as it would be alongside the body.

If the cremated remains are not treated with proper dignity, cremation can allow opportunity for disrespect of the human body. The practice of scattering cremated remains over the mountains, or keeping them at home, is not the reverent disposition that the Church requires. There have been instances of dividing the ashes between family members or of incorporating them into pottery. Such, or similar, actions cheapen the respect for human life and show a lack of proper respect and dignity for the dead. Scattering the ashes also deprives loved ones and descendants of the opportunity to visit the remains at the cemetery or mausoleum where they can pray and reflect upon the life and memory of the deceased. Some may question whether the Church has taught clearly enough about this matter. Perhaps not, but I want to make it clear now that the improper disposition and scattering of the ashes is contrary to Church teaching and therefore not permitted.

CONCLUSION

As men and women of faith, let us reflect upon the mystery of death and the honor that we give to our deceased loved ones. Let us remember the words of Jesus, “ I am the resurrection and the life, whoever believes in me though he should die will come to life, and whoever is alive and believes in me will never die.” (John 11:26)

Trusting in the power of Jesus to overcome our shortcomings, we are confident that God wants all of us to enjoy eternal happiness. Each of us must do our part to achieve our eternal goal, and to encourage others to do the same. We honor the dead and pray for them that they will have everlasting life.