



**STATEMENT ON ALKALINE HYDROLYSIS
BY THE COMMISSION FOR DOCTRINE
OF THE CANADIAN CONFERENCE OF CATHOLIC BISHOPS**

The death and resurrection of Christ is the heart of the Christian faith. Christians live in hope that after death, we will share in Christ's bodily resurrection (cf. Rm 6:5). This is why the Church has always taken pains to ensure that the burial of the dead – one of the corporal works of mercy – reflects this faith in the resurrection of the body.ⁱ The dignity accorded to the bodies of the deceased – including the method of their disposition – is not only a proclamation of our faith in the importance and value of the human body but is of great importance in the process of grief and healing for the bereaved.

In recent decades, the practice of flame-based bodily cremation has increased in our country to the point that it is now more popular than traditional burial.ⁱⁱ Although the Church prefers traditional burial as the clearest representation of Christian hope in the resurrection, it does not object to cremation, provided it is not chosen for reasons contrary to Christian teaching.ⁱⁱⁱ In recent years, however, new forms of bodily disposition have been developed, specific among them alkaline hydrolysis, in which the body of the deceased is placed in a metal cylinder and dissolved in a chemical bath, leaving only bone fragments similar to those resulting from cremation.^{iv} The resulting effluent is then flushed into the local sewer system, while the remaining bone fragments are dried, ground and placed in an urn for the family of the deceased, as is the case with cremation.

The process of alkaline hydrolysis is currently being marketed as a “green” and ecologically friendly alternative to cremation, since it consumes less energy and does not release toxic chemicals into the atmosphere. However, the claim that it is ecologically superior is currently disputed. It is now available in a growing number of Canadian provinces.

Our research leads this Commission to the opinion that alkaline hydrolysis does not manifest adequate respect for the dignity of the human body as proclaimed by the faith of the Church. This is primarily due to the fact that, apart from bone residue, the remnants of the entire body are disposed of in the sewer system.^v It is further compounded by the fact that, in the operation of certain alkaline hydrolysis machines, the machine operator may first be required to puncture or crush the skull of the deceased in order to ensure the complete digestion of soft tissues. This adds another indignity to the body.

In a forthcoming document, we will consider in greater detail the deep reasons for the Church's teaching on the disposition of human bodies, including the connection of this teaching to the grieving and healing process for the loved ones who often must decide the method of bodily disposition. At the moment, however, given the reasons enunciated above, and as authorized by the Permanent Council of the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops, we invite Diocesan and Eparchial Bishops to discourage the practice of alkaline hydrolysis in their respective diocese or eparchy and to indicate to Catholic funeral homes and Catholic cemeteries that its use is not to be promoted or offered.

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Episcopal Commission for Doctrine
Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops

ⁱ The most current and important authoritative text on this question is from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Instruction Ad resurgendum cum Christo: regarding burial of the deceased and the conservation of the ashes in the case of cremation*, 2016.

ⁱⁱ <http://www.cremationassociation.org/page/IndustryStatistics>

ⁱⁱⁱ *Code of Canon Law*, 1176, §3; *Code of Canons of the Eastern Churches*, 876, §3.

^{iv} The present Statement applies only to alkaline hydrolysis. Other new methods of bodily disposition pose ethical questions unique to each method.

^v It is true that the Church allows the similar disposal of blood and other bodily fluids during the embalming process, but in the case of alkaline hydrolysis we are faced not with a few litres of fluid, but rather hundreds of litres representing most of the person's body.