

ALKALINE HYDROLYSIS

Questions and Answers from a Catholic Perspective

Q: What does the Catholic Church say about the proper disposition of human bodies?

Is it a moral issue?

A: The Catechism of the Catholic Church teaches, “bodies of the dead must be treated with respect and charity, in faith and hope of the Resurrection. The burial of the dead is a corporal work of mercy, it honors the children of God who are temples of the Holy Spirit.” For most of her history, the Catholic Church, with very rare exceptions, has insisted that the bodies of the deceased be interred in graves or other suitable burial sites. Burial shows a greater respect for the human body which forms a part of the person’s identity while more clearly expressing the belief in the resurrection of the body at the end of time. As such, the matter of the disposition of human bodies is a moral issue.

Q: Is cremation an acceptable practice for Catholics?

A: Since the burial of the body shows greater dignity and respect, the Church sees the internment of a body as the best means of treating the body with respect and charity. However, she understands that “cremation is also a contemporary phenomenon in virtue of the changed circumstances of life.” In 1963, Pope Paul VI allowed the practice of incineration cremation for the faithful when “they are forced to do so by necessity.” In the face of misunderstandings surrounding the permissibility of cremation, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, issued the instruction *Ad Resurgendum cum Christo* in 2016, reminding Catholics of the obligation for cremated remains to be interred in cemeteries or other sacred places. The Church’s law thus continues to encourage the burying of the bodies of the dead, but it does not forbid “cremation unless it has been chosen for reasons which are contrary to Christian teaching.” From the moment the body is collected by the funeral home, through the process of cremation and until the final disposition, the body must be treated with the same respect afforded to a traditional burial.

Q: What is alkaline hydrolysis cremation?

A: Alkaline hydrolysis, sometimes called aquamation, resomation, or flameless cremation, is an increasingly popular cremation process which uses a chemical solution, to reduce the human body to a liquid and bones. After the body has been “bathed” in the chemical solution for a few hours, the process is completed leaving behind about 100 gallons of sterile liquid and bone fragments. The liquid solution is disposed of through the sewer system while the bone fragments are then pulverized into ash and returned to the family. In essence, the process attempts to speed up the natural process of human decomposition from a matter of years to a few hours

Q: What is the more typical method of cremation?

A: The typical method of cremation is called “incineration cremation.” With this method, the body is heated to a temperature of 1,400 – 1,600°F, instigating a two-part combustion process. After about 1.5 hours to 2 hours, the body’s tissue, organs, body fat and other materials burn off as a gas which is discharged directly into the air, while the remaining bone fragments are collected in a secondary chamber. Once those remains cool they are pulverized, placed in an urn and returned to the family.

Q: How is alkaline hydrolysis different than the incineration cremation process?

A: On a basic level, both processes introduce a chemical reaction to speed up the decomposition of the human body, but they introduce the remnants back into the world in drastically different manners. In the more common method, the gaseous remains of the chemical reaction are introduced directly back into the atmosphere. But in alkaline hydrolysis, the liquid remains are poured down the drain.

Q: Aren't the remains from both methods of cremation technically "not human" anymore?

A: While it is true the chemical remnants of both processes are no longer human it must be noted that they originated from deceased humans and thus are deserving of respect and dignity. This dignity and respect demand the liquid remnant must not be disposed of in the same way as human waste is disposed of.

Q: During the embalming process, the bodily fluids of a deceased body are disposed through the sewer system. Isn't that acceptable? How is that different than alkaline hydrolysis?

A: The blood and other bodily fluids which are disposed of during the embalming process are certainly a part of the human body, but they are essentially different from the liquid remnant of alkaline hydrolysis which contains what was at one time the body itself. Likewise, the disposal of bodily fluids in the embalming process seems reasonably acceptable because they are returned to the environment, just as a decomposed body is also returned to the earth, while disposing of the liquid remnant from the Alkaline Hydrolysis process is disposed of through the sewer system.

Q: Has the Vatican addressed alkaline hydrolysis?

A: The Vatican has addressed cremation generally, but has not weighed in on the specific moral implications of alkaline hydrolysis. However, other local Churches have addressed this alkaline hydrolysis when confronted with the matter. In 2011, Donald Cardinal Wuerl, Archbishop of Washington and then chairman of the Committee on Doctrine of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB), determined it "unnecessarily disrespectful of the human body." Other Catholic bishops have addressed it locally as well.

Q: Why has the Archdiocese of St. Louis deemed it necessary to comment on alkaline hydrolysis now?

A: Recent changes to regulations concerning funeral homes have allowed for this process to be offered in the state of Missouri. In response to inquiries made to the Office of Sacred Worship and Catholic Cemeteries of the Archdiocese of St. Louis, Archbishop Carlson and Bishop Rivituso deemed it necessary to research the topic and provide pastoral guidelines for Catholics of the Archdiocese of St. Louis.

Q: Should Catholics make use of alkaline hydrolysis cremation?

A: In consultation with the Office of Sacred Worship, Catholic Cemeteries of the Archdiocese of St. Louis, and a bioethicist with advanced degrees in both theology and bioethics, Archbishop Carlson has concluded that this form of cremation in its current practice violates the dignity of the deceased human person. The Archdiocese of St. Louis advises Catholics to avoid alkaline hydrolysis until another suitable means of disposing of the liquid remnant can be established.



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