

Caring for the dead is a spiritual mission, not secular

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For more than 150 years, the Australian community has trusted the Catholic Church, among others, to bury the dead, keep their graves respectfully, and offer comfort and solace to their grieving families.

It is, you might say, what the Church is for; our core business.

We have been operating cemeteries successfully in Sydney all that time, have built up a perpetual care fund to ensure our graves are maintained into the future, and have been securing land for future gravesites.

Despite our commendable record, we have been told that all faith operators will be dismissed this week.

Cemetery management will now be handed over to a costly government bureaucracy, with no sympathy for the mission of caring for the dead and no experience in caring for graves.

It is a shocking decision.

Some people in government or bureaucracy would like to stop burials altogether and require everyone to be cremated. Some would like to reuse existing graves for additional burials. Some would even be willing to disturb old graves so as to use the land for development.

Christians, Jews and Muslims are united in their concern that the graves of their dead continue to be respected and that dignified burial be available into the future.

But the NSW government has made absolutely no provision for a single new cemetery in more than a century. They have made absolutely no provision for the perpetual care of existing graves. Now they are grabbing the care funds built up by Catholics and others over the years for the care of their graves and chapels and applying them to other uses.

Where for a century and a half my predecessors and I, and many of our clergy, have celebrated funerals and prayers in Catholic chapels at Rookwood and elsewhere, access to those chapels will now be by permission of some secular bureaucrat.

In the Catholic tradition, burying the dead is one of the seven "corporal works of mercy", and praying for the dead one of the seven "spiritual works of mercy".

But it is not just a Catholic concern. That's why the Church has worked collaboratively with other faith groups over the past four years on solutions that would deliver more burial space at no cost to the government or the taxpayer – while still respecting all religious believers and the rights of our deceased to be laid to rest, undisturbed by future generations.

The solutions had the support of the Catholic, Islamic and Jewish communities, as well as many others. These communities have, for generations, trusted the Catholic Metropolitan Cemeteries Trust to offer burials that demonstrate reverence to the human body even in death, and care for loved ones left behind.

Despite differing beliefs, we are united in our preference for a faith provider for cemeteries.

The NSW Premier has repeatedly assured me that faith groups will be part of the solution. In recent weeks, we were invited into a dialogue with her most senior staff to find a solution that would respect the unique role that faith groups have in the provision of burials. We now feel like we have been deceived. Immediately after the Upper Hunter by-election, this decision has been dumped in our laps.

I have already been contacted by many people concerned about the future of the graves of their loved ones, and about their own future graves. I share their concern. These are very emotional and deeply spiritual matters for people. The exclusion of faiths and charities from cemetery management lacks sensitivity and justice towards people already suffering loss.

No doubt there are some in government or the bureaucracy who would like to see faith groups vacate this space, as they would like to drive us out of education, healthcare and the like. But we will not give up the care of our dead without a fight. This is a matter of religious liberty and a matter of respect for the dead.

I call on the Premier to reverse the announcement of Property Minister Melinda Pavey and restore people's confidence that their loved ones will be truly allowed to rest in peace.

Anthony Fisher has been the

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since 2014.