

# Catholic Funeral Traditions And Alterations Due To COVID-19 Pandemic: Implications To Compliance Of Health Protocols

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## Abstract

The concept of death and burial practices vary across time and culture. Cultural changes in death, such as burial rituals and expressions of mourning, loss, and sadness, have influenced the view of death as a transition to other forms of being. This study explores how health protocols due to the COVID-19 pandemic impact funeral practices among Catholics. Using ethnography and interpretive phenomenology, 30 purposively selected participants from Cebu, Philippines were interviewed on the cultural background of burial, the alterations of funeral practices, and their personal experiences of bereavement and mourning when health protocols on the management of the dead due to COVID-19 were implemented. The thematic analysis of field notes from in-depth interviews led to the emergence of themes. Traditional funeral practices include long vigil and public viewing, massive gatherings, and the giving of 'abuloy' to the bereaved family. With the imposition of health protocols, there were restrictions on mass gatherings, and virtual funeral services became popular. With the alterations of funeral traditions, Cebuanos yearned for communal mourning and human connection, holding of mourning ceremonies, and in-person goodbye rituals. At the onset, they felt deprived of conveying love and respect for the deceased but were then educated on their beliefs about a good death. The dignity of the dead and the cultural-religious rights remain respected despite the adaptations of bereavement and funeral practices to prevent the danger of contagion. Implications to compliance with health protocols were advanced in strengthening adaptations of services to the deceased, forging closer partnerships with the local government units, and raising awareness on the influence of religious traditions in one's culture. Hence, an in-depth understanding of community culture, beliefs, traditions, and values is vital to design effective dead management plans during a pandemic.

**Keywords:** burial protocols; communal mourning; COVID-19 pandemic; health protocols; funeral tradition; management of the dead

## Introduction

The concept of death and burial practices vary across time and culture. Spatio-temporal researches revealed diversified notions of death and dying. For Catholics, family tradition shaped burial practices (Cornelio, 2016). The cultural variations of death, including funeral rituals and expressions of grief, bereavement, and mourning, have influenced one's regard for death as a transition to other forms of existence.

Worden (2009), as cited in Gire (2014), succinctly pointed out that 'grief' is the personal emotional reactions that follow when a loved one dies, while 'bereavement' pertains to the subsequent experiences that follow after the death and 'mourning' is the expression of grief. Though death is regarded as personal, grief and bereavement are universals that everyone, across boundaries, shares. Expressions of these universal feelings, such as funeral rituals and the

extent of participation in the customs and traditions, are culture-specific.

Through time different funeral practices emerged to honor the dead. Believing that there is life after death and deeply influenced by Catholicism, Cebuanos have honored the dead by ensuring that a mourning period, holding an extended wake, the 24-hour-vigil, is observed. In this period, the rosary is recited for nine days, and relatives and close friends attend novena prayers with songs. Hays (2012) stressed that these funeral rites are very important to Filipinos and that these mark the uniqueness of a society's indigenous religious beliefs. Similarly, Sabanpan-Yu (2009), in an examination of death rites among traditional and contemporary Cebu, pointed out the cultural practice associated with 'waking the dead' despite being influenced by a foreign culture.

The imposition of health protocols by the Inter-Agency Task Force (IATF) for the management of emerging infectious diseases in 2020 led to the alterations of traditional funeral practices in Cebu. Mass gatherings were banned in the entire province of Cebu, it being under general, then enhanced community quarantine status. The prohibition of public gatherings even for a religious purpose caused the modifications of expressions towards mourning. IATF Resolution No. 104 was strictly adopted to address public health concerns due to the rising case of COVID-19 in the country. The restriction of movement and observing on-site capacity were deemed necessary to minimize the spread of infectious disease. Hamid and Jahangir (2020) pointed out how COVID-19 changed and reshaped the traditional practices associated with death and mourning, citing how bereavement is experienced in solitude.

Similarly, Şimşek Arslan and Buldukoglu (2021), in a study that examines the grief rituals and reactions of the bereaved over a death of a loved one, found out that the participants showed more physiological grief reactions, and the rituals did not affect the grief reactions. In the same vein, the study of Cardoso et al. (2020) highlighted how performing familial farewell rituals, which complete the mourning, helps the family members cope with

the loss as mourning becomes complete. While Burrell and Selman (2020) accentuated the significant role of funeral officiants to provide support and comfort, thus reducing grief when heightened restrictions were imposed on the public. The therapeutic functions of human connections during the wake and even during commemorative events have been supported by the study of Hidalgo et al. (2020), focusing on the systems defining the context of cultural aspects of funeral rituals in various countries. In the same vein, Mortazavi et al. (2021) described how social support received by the bereaved family helps mitigate the emotional impact of the grieving process

Religion significantly influences grieving and dying rituals throughout cultures (Chachkes & Jennings, 1994; Younoszai, 1993). This implies that the soul's return to God is the focus of Catholic funeral rites and is the main objective of the long funeral wake. Depending on the region of origin and amount of acculturation into mainstream society, rituals are conducted differently and at different times.

Since COVID19 is transmitted through direct human-to-human contact, preventing infection restrictions at mass gatherings is an important tool for public health protection (Verma & Prakash, 2020). In addition, governments of different countries have postponed large-scale religious, cultural, social, scientific, sporting, and political events in different parts of the world..

In the Philippines, the imposition of health protocols due to the health crisis brought by COVID-19 has challenged traditional beliefs and practices related to mourning and honoring the dead. On this premise, the study looked into the funeral traditions and alterations due to the COVID-19 pandemic to provide an in-depth description and understanding of the phenomenon of adhering to cultural practices while still complying with state-mandated health protocols.

### **Research Purpose**

The study explored how the health protocols due to the COVID-19 pandemic impact Cebuano's funeral practices.

Specifically, it looked into the following:

1. traditional funeral practices before COVID-19;
2. the alterations of these practices;
3. practices missed due to the state-mandated health protocols; and
4. participants' feelings toward the current changes in funeral practices.

## Methodology

### Design

This study used ethnography and interpretative phenomenology to capture the cultural background of burial and the individual's personal experience with the phenomenon of burial of the dead before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. Ethnography consists of a detailed explanation and interpretation of the culture of "all social networks that make up an entity whose social relationships are governed by customs" (Erickson, 1973). Brown (2009) argued that interpretive phenomenology is about understanding lived experiences and how participants understand their own experiences. It specifically documents traditional Cebuano Catholic burial practices and how these practices are affected by the burial protocol imposed by the government. This documentation is best done using interpretive phenomenology so that participants can speak freely and tell the story in their own words. In the interpretive phenomenology method, the researchers identify phenomena (reality or experience) that can be explained when people "experience" an experience.

### Research locale

The study was conducted in Cebu City and other cities in the province of Cebu, Philippines. These cities have a significant number of mortalities related to COVID-19. As of February 23, 2021, Cebu City had 727 deaths (DOH Central Visayas COVID-19 Case Bulletin 2021). Not surprisingly, more deaths have been recorded in cities. These are commerce and industry hubs that are crowded with people that allow virus infection and transmission if health protocols are not strictly

enforced and seriously adhered to. The big cities of Cebu like Lapu-Lapu City, Mandaue City, and Talisay City recorded a number of COVID-19-related deaths in 2020.

### Study participants and data-gathering procedure

The 30 study participants, coded as SP, were residents of urban areas in the capital cities of Cebu City and other cities in the province of Cebu. As an exploratory qualitative study, the data was collected from the participants composed of two groups. The first group includes those who are familiar with the traditional burial practices of the elderly or Cebuano Catholics at the selected research facilities. They also include the priests, general ministers, graveyard caretakers, funeral hall managers, "mananabtan" or prayer leaders during wake, and local health authorities, who are directly or indirectly involved in the burial practices. The second group represents immediate family members and relatives of individuals who died during the pandemic due to COVID-19 and other ailments and were buried pursuant to government health regulations.

Three methods of gathering data were employed for triangulation: an examination of records on death due to COVID-19, an in-depth interview with the participants based on the specific research questions, and a systematic literature review on funeral practices during the pandemic. The data were collected both in-person and via a video-conferencing application. Field notes were digitally transcribed and thematically analyzed.

### Data analysis

The gathered data, also known as field notes, from the interviews were transcribed following the steps espoused by Braun and Clarke's (2012) thematic analysis. Analysis commenced with data familiarization. Recorded interviews and transcripts were reviewed several times to identify the preliminary codes that would describe the content per interview. Thereafter, patterns or themes in the codes were identified across the different interviews. With all the

themes, a critical review was done to avoid missing out on relevant and meaningful data. The analysis culminated with the naming and defining of the final themes, which became the bases of the exhaustive description of the study focus.

### **Ethical considerations**

Before conducting the study, researchers ensured that participants were comfortable and ready to participate. They were told to freely express their thoughts and to have enough time to answer the interview questions. In addition, researchers also ensured the safety of research participants and protected them from all forms of harm or danger by adhering to the ethical principles in doing research which include their understanding of the study content and their extent of participation.

The following were included in the informed consent signed by the participants.

**Nature and extent of participation.** The researchers conducted an orientation to the participants online about the study to give them a brief overview and understand their role and part of the study. They were made aware that the responses were confidential and would be treated with the utmost confidentiality. The participants were fully aware of the aims and of the study. These include the:

**Kind of data.** The data gathered in this study are qualitative. The qualitative data were the narratives of the participants who are relatives, close friends, or significant others of the COVID-19 affected individual from the interview conducted.

**Methodology.** The researchers followed the fundamental processes and procedures in conducting a study. The procedures were discussed with the participants for the clarity of their understanding of the study. It was also emphasized that the data collected would be analyzed, interpreted, and presented as a whole.

**Possible threats and danger.** The participants were assured that there would be no possible

threats and dangers while they were participating in this study.

**Alternatives.** The researchers made sure that the participants of this study had voluntarily participated and that there were no threats and harms done in order to make the participants participate in this study. A simple token of gratitude was given to the participants.

**Voluntary participation.** The participants voluntarily participated in the interview and member checking. It was clarified in the orientation that they could withdraw from the study anytime.

**The right to withdraw in the participation of the study.** It was also emphasized that they have the right to withdraw or terminate their participation in the study at any time and for any reason. Even if they have signed the informed consent form, they were not compelled to participate in the study or can terminate the interview without having to explain the reason for such termination.

**Communication details.** The researchers gave their personal information together with their email addresses and cellular phone number so that the participants could contact the researcher immediately if they had queries about the study.

As to the methods of maintaining confidentiality, all the data collected were secured and safeguarded. All personal information made optional such as the name, contact number, and any private information that would lead to the identification of their identities. The information gathered, stored, and secured would become null and void after three years. Moreover, the participants were allowed to ask for a copy of the result of the study. By this, the researcher must willingly give feedback and a copy of the study to the participants voluntarily participated in this study. Lastly, the researchers ensured no conflict of interest and that the research did not harm other research participants. Professionalism was observed through the data provided by the participants without forcing or threatening them.

## Results and Discussion

A total of 30 participants in Cebu City and Cebu Province were interviewed on their funeral practices before the pandemic, during the pandemic, funeral practices that were missed due to the imposition of health protocols, and their feelings about the current burial practices.

### Traditional funeral practices before the COVID-19 pandemic

Cebuanos funeral practices are personalized, and some religious activities and rituals are observed. Relatives and friends are part of the traditions, especially during the wake. When visiting the dead, the Cebuanos pay tribute to them. It is necessary to be solemn in the cemetery. Based on the narratives of the participants, two themes emerged: long vigil and public viewing and massive gatherings and giving of 'abuloy' or donation.

**Theme 1: Long vigil and public viewing.** It is usually practiced funeral liturgy is conducted at home or at the church. Many people will visit the wake either in funeral parlors or at home. The relatives and friends of the deceased believe prayer is very important for the soul of their loved ones. The more people gathered together, especially during the novenas and holy mass, is of great help for the soul of the deceased. Religion significantly influences grieving and dying rituals throughout cultures (Chachkes & Jennings, 1994; Younoszai, 1993). This implies that the return of the soul to God is the focus of Catholic funeral rites and is the main objective of the long funeral wake. Depending on the region of origin and amount of acculturation into mainstream society, rituals are conducted in different ways and at different times. Cebuanos practicing Catholicism pray for the Rosary for nine days after the death of their loved one. Another bead is prayed again 40 days after its loss and on its first anniversary wherein most of the family members gathered together.

Families noticed a stronger sense of family unity and a greater sense of belonging to others when someone in the family died. Cebuano male family members usually carry the casket during the funeral. Convenience of community gathering and family closeness is

practiced in times of sadness. This is observed in the participants' narratives:

The family members who live abroad or from other provinces will go home just to witness the wake and attend the burial. Family closeness is strengthened. During the burial, the male members of the family would carry the casket. (SP-01)

In our culture, we used to have all the family members and relatives during the funeral- even those who live far managed to be present. The, mass was celebrated prior to the burial and all those who knew attended the mass and gathered around during the interment. (SP06)

Carrying the casket to the door of the deceased means saying goodbye to the family. Internment follows the funeral service and a procession of guests usually follow the hearse carrying the casket or remains of the deceased to the cemetery (Lowey, 2015). Moreover, social support plays a vital role in the coping process. After the death of a loved one, people were sad and scared and mourned. They also found that grief is a mechanism for coping with mourning but does not appear to interfere with activities of daily living (Bahar et al., 2012).

**Theme 2: Massive gatherings and giving of 'abuloy.'** The need to pay homage to the departed has been ingrained in the culture Catholics. The participants mentioned that during the wake, they would meet and pray

together for the soul of the departed. The participants feel the importance of having many people during the wake. The giving of donations (or abuloy) also supports the family for all the expenses during the wake and burial services.

Before pandemic, the bereaved family will decide the number of days where family and friends can visit the wake. During the burial, the marshals are there- the barangay officers or police officers, assigned by the local government. There was no limit on the number of people who could visit the wake. (SP-10)

When people die, the family will give the best for their remains. It is our culture that many people will visit the wake the burial takes place. It is customary to have the wake, at least for five days, where everyone has the chance to visit and express their farewell. Relatives from afar are considered in the scheduling of the interment. (SP-06)

The narratives implied that there are no restrictions on the duration of the wake and the number of people attending the wake and funeral services. Ceremonies were also held to "secure the goodwill" of the deceased, but funeral rituals were also undertaken to develop and sustain ties with the living (Kastenbaum, 2004) as cited in

(Smith, 2017). With several changes due to technological advancement, burial practices remained constant across time.

Abuloy is part of Cebuanos' tradition. Filipinos place a high value on funeral customs. Filipinos leave money in boxes, biscuit cans, and glass jars alongside or inside the coffin from the wake until the funeral. Cebuanos believe that the dead's spirit stays around for a long time before traveling to the afterlife and that the corpse returns to the four elements: earth, water, fire, and air. They used to bury the deceased in a grave and then rebury the bones in an ossuary after the funeral. The "abuloy" will be used to cover the costs of the funeral. Some of the narratives are:

During the last day of the novena, many people will help the bereaved family in cash or offer their services. (SP-21)

"Abuloy" is considered a voluntary donation or support supported by the deep respect and affection for the donor's bereaved family. Any amount of donation means family help, a sign of cooperation and intimacy. This means that cooperation is pronounced at the time of sadness and death. It is not extraordinary for memorial service participants (relatives, friends and other significant others) to give cash to the bereaved family as a proof of affection and to help defray the expenses incurred during the memorial service.

### **Funeral protocols imposed by the government during COVID-19 pandemic**

The COVID- 19 pandemic changed the implementation of the traditional funeral practices of Cebuanos. Burial practices and memorial services have dramatically been altered in support of the state-mandated health protocols. It is believed that religious leaders, religious groups, and faith communities can help save lives and reduce sickness caused by COVID-19. They are the most important source of help, comfort, advice, and direct health treatment for people who are in need of it. They also provide social services to the communities

they serve. Religious leaders of faith-based organizations and faith-based communities their members' health information to protect their own members can be shared as well as larger groups, which may be more prone to be more widely regarded than from other sources (WHO, 2020). They have the ability to provide pastoral care in the event of a public health emergency, and spiritual support can advocate for the concerns of people with different health issues populations that are vulnerable. The analysis of the study participants' narratives led to themes that describe funeral protocols during the COVID-19 pandemic: restrictions on mass gatherings and virtual funeral services

### **Theme 1: Restrictions of mass gatherings.**

Separation from a loved one during critical illness and death was unanimously described as a painful experience for everyone. Serious loss and ongoing grief were explained by those whose final connection to our family, especially when they died at the hospital. Families acknowledged compliance in the name of population health and solidarity with clinical professionals caring for their loved one, despite the great sacrifices made, in the cause of population health (Dennis, Vanstone, Swinton, et al., 2021). During the pandemic, people were restricted in their ability to gather as a result of the pandemic's restrictions.

The local government unit allows three days for the wake of non-COVID-related deaths. Only the immediate family is allowed to be in the house or in the funeral parlor. Mass gathering is not allowed. (SP-01)

The family members usually share stories about the deceased during the wake. Due to government

restrictions on mass gatherings, our practice of meeting before the burial is prohibited. (SP-24)

We usually prepare food for the people visiting us. This time, it is limited because only the immediate family members are allowed to visit us. Some of our friends cannot anymore comfort us because their presence is restricted. (SP-28)

Due to COVID-19 pandemic, the mass gathering is prohibited in all areas in Cebu. Local and national health authorities are tasked to enforce the state-mandated health protocols. Permits are required should the family want to hold a two-day wake for non-COVID-related death of a family member. To WHO (2020), mass gatherings are a risk factor for the rapid spread of COVID-19, especially in 2020. Since COVID19 is transmitted through direct human-to-human contact, preventing infection restrictions at mass gatherings is an important tool for public health protection (Verma & Prakash, 2020). Governments of different countries have postponed large-scale religious, cultural, social, scientific, sporting and political events of all kinds in different parts of the world. The government has taken all precautions and is imposing an adequate budget for people, facilities, medicine, and vaccine in order to fight the spread of the virus.

**Theme 2: Virtual funeral services.** Cebuanos are known for its close family ties. With the restrictions of movement, technology plays a vital role in comforting the bereaved family. Considering the possibility of many remote family members simultaneously viewing,

manipulating, and writing on their devices, there were a number of usability and synchronization considerations to address. However, the message space shared among individuals who live in different areas is very meaningful to the bereaved family.

Mass gathering is prohibited. As such, we utilized social media like Facebook so that other family members and friends could attend the novena. (SP-10)

We use Google Meet every novena so that our relatives can attend and they can view the urn of the deceased. We are afraid of having lots of people also in the house because of the virus. Abuloy is limited because mass gathering is prohibited). (SP- 19)

At home, the prayers due to COVID-19 were done using technology. Participation in novena was done virtually, hence, many were able to join. (SP-06)

The technology and various communication tools have kept the family members connected. Muturi, Freeman, and Banner (2020) mentioned that the proliferation of virtual funeral services has opened up opportunities to connect family and friends who were unable to attend the funeral due to COVID-19 restrictions, financial constraints, work promises, or existing health conditions. In addition, hosting virtual funerals improve

accessibility and allow more people to participate through an online platform with little or no limit on the number of online viewers. This is very evident in the narratives of the participants.

Technology is helpful because we can do video calls with our friends and relatives. (SP-17)

Cash donations were sometimes given via GCash. Through the GCash, one can have a virtual wallet that can be used to send and receive domestic monetary donations. Also, the LGU is monitoring our day-to-day activities. That is why we do not celebrate the 40th day except for the novena mass. (SP-20)

Technology is very useful this pandemic because cash donations or abuloy is made via GCash or bank transfer. (SP-28)

Technology plays a vital role in the funeral activities of Cebuano families. Virtual funeral services are a practical alternative to a traditional in-person funeral, allowing individuals to connect, grieve, and commemorate via digital technologies and applications. Inexpensive and reliable internet technology and communication gadgets have become widely available, like mobile phones, which have established real-time connections through voice and video technologies that are almost universally accessible to individuals of all ages and locations. Audio and images are recorded during memorials or funerals are live-



streamed via online platforms or applications. In some cases, the funeral provider may already have the ability to record and stream virtual services (Muturi, Freeman & Banner, 2020). In other cases, the family can record the service and do the live streaming themselves.

Generally, virtual funerals may allow relatives and friends to connect in real-time and provide a cheap and convenient way to celebrate life and mourn the deceased during the COVID-19 pandemic. Verma and Prakash (2020) believed that media and information technology provide essential social support in preventing and controlling the outbreak of COVID-19. Hence, limiting mass assembly may be the primary preventive strategy to combat the spread of the COVID-19.

### **Traditional funeral practices missed during the COVID-19 pandemic**

Over time funeral practices and other commemorative events have been part of people's customs that shape their cultural identity. These practices include having and providing opportunities for family and friends to bid farewell. However, just as the pandemic affected all other areas of life, it has also altered one's experience of death and grieving. The adaptations were not outrightly embraced by most, if not all, of the Cebuanos. When asked about the traditional funeral practices they missed during the pandemic due to the impositions of health protocols, the participants shared their storied accounts. Analysis of the narratives led to the two indexed themes: communal mourning and human connection and the dignified management of the dead with subthemes performing farewell rituals and physical engagements and long conversations.

**Theme 1. Communal mourning and human connection.** Social support and feeling connected, from psychological theories, are known to help decrease depressive symptoms. Having relatives and friends, aside from the immediate family members, during loss and grief provides the bereaved with comfort and consolation. The random conversations during wake are healthy ways to cope with one's grief. Regardless of the topics shared, the

conversations can strengthen human connections, which advance the emotional well-being a person in grief.

**Performing farewell rituals.** Customarily, aside from attending a funeral or memorial service, the participants expressed the importance of allowing the bereaved person to express their grief as mourners join them during the funeral reception. This practice changed during the pandemic as restrictions and limitations on people gathering were imposed.

Our connection and human touch. It is like a semi-reunion when we are attending one's wake. We do not care how long we stand while talking. (SP-15)

It is celebrating the mass with the bereaved family. The funeral mass, although for the soul, but at the same time, is comforting, consoling the bereaved families. What I did was assure them of the prayers. I ask them to offer mass at a later date without the body. At the same time, we give special counseling, especially when they need somebody to talk to. We are not allowed celebrate mass or to bless the dead caused by COVID. I had one experience, but it was one month after the burial. (SP-11)

The help came from all family members, since they were not here when this happened. The long wake and the many

people who would pay respect- all these eased our pain. (SP-19)

The long vigil where everyone can attend. Siblings and grandchildren, including acquaintances, were not around. Many could have witnessed until he was laid down in his resting place. (SP-08)

During the funeral receptions and wake, friends and relatives hope to gather to pay their respect and support the deceased's grieving family. The therapeutic functions of human connections during the wake and even during commemorative events have been supported by the study of Hidalgo et al. (2020), focusing on the systems defining the context of cultural aspects of funeral rituals in various countries. In the same vein, Mortazavi et al. (2021) described how social support received by the bereaved family helps mitigate the emotional impact of the grieving process. This explains why, in the absence of public viewing, there was the longing to be with the bereaved (in the case of the relatives and close friends) and to have significant others, the community of mourners, present during the funeral receptions (in case of the grieving family). Moreover, behavioral changes were also noted among those few who joined the bereaved family.

**Physical engagements and long conversations.** With prayers done at home and conscious of observing health protocols, the people opted not to engage in all forms of 'get-together' to prevent the spread of the virus. Though wanting to be hospitable, the family of the deceased experienced rejection in terms of offering snacks, wanting long conversations, and inviting others to join the rosary during and after the burial. According to them,

Others just dropped by, not even staying for a while. They did not even take the snacks offered to them. We were on our own. It was very exclusive since only the immediate family members were around. Though how close the people are aware of the protocol, they chose not to be visit to express their condolences. (SP-05)

Before COVID, we have the late vigil. People stayed until in the morning. Seeing them around can ease the loneliness and sadness. At least I can say that my father is a good man when a number of friends come to say their farewell. (SP-13)

It seemed like nobody had died since it happened so quickly. Even the siblings did not have the chance to pat their last respects since the remains was directly brought from the hospital to the cemetery. (SP-09)

The deprivation of performing the rituals and public gatherings of grief was regarded as unfinished mourning. With the loss, the bereaved family did not enjoy the presence of others. They were left alone to

cope with the grief. Without the initiatives from the local government to provide assistance and the support of technology for communication to occur, the process of acceptance can be challenging. Worden (2018), as cited in Mortazavi et al. (2021), succinctly illustrated the active process of grieving. The model constitutes the four stages: accepting the reality of loss, processing the pain of grief, adjusting to a world without the deceased, accepting a new life having found the enduring connection with the deceased.

### **Theme 2. Holding of mourning ceremonies.**

Managing the dead bodies with consideration for their dignity has become a challenge with the emergence of COVID-19. Whilst, guiding principles for safe community-led body handling and mourning ceremonies during the pandemic have been disseminated, issues pertaining to the dignified management of the dead (with suspected or confirmed COVID-19 infection) emerged, such as transportation of bodies and burial practices have been altered. With this, the participants shared about family funeral traditions and management of the dead, which characterized dignified death.

**Family funeral traditions.** Mourning process and practices were dramatically changed as measures for infection prevention were instituted. Apart from the safe body handling, not seeing the physical body parts made it difficult for the bereaved to acknowledge or accept the loss. Part of preparing for the loss is to ensure that they can attend the funeral activities- e.g., public viewing, long wake, prayer novena, misa de requiem, etc. All these were suppressed. To the participants,

The celebration of mass before the burial was not done anymore, not even the blessing before burying the dead. The usual things done during wake, the gathering people. These are the traditions I missed.  
(SP-06)

It is the hospital's decision, not the family's when a family member dies due to COVID. Funeral parlors are contacted to transport the cadaver to the nearest local cemetery. Thereafter, the family will then pay for all the expenses.  
(SP-14)

In places with active transmission of COVID-19, all funerals and mourning gatherings, whatever the cause of death, were modified to facilitate physical distancing between mourners, as they can be infected with the virus and contagious without showing symptoms.

**Management of the dead.** With the infection prevention and control for safe management of the body, handling the dead has been strictly considered. To ascertain public safety, designated personnel manage the bodies of the deceased with suspected or confirmed COVID-19 infection at the death site, storage, and transporting the dead. Through its improvised procedures and guidelines, Khoo et al. (2020) cited how Malaysia implemented environmental cleaning and disinfection where various agencies are involved. It is noteworthy to point out that emergency health measures are adopted to mitigate the possibility of exponentially increasing the number of COVID-positive.

Once the death is caused by COVID, the cadaver is placed in a body bag. No family member was allowed to be onsite.  
(SP-04)

Despite the hour at night, I saw how personnel from local cemeteries still buried the COVID-

positive. Using a backhoe to save time, I have witnessed how the dead were buried. (SP-06)

In the hospital, an hour after my father was declared dead, we were asked to look for a funeral service and a cemetery for my father has to be buried within that day. (SP-09)

The participants think that the suppression of funeral rituals is to veer away from dignified death. Death is regarded as dignified when with a virtuous life, friends and relatives were able to bid farewell, perform the funeral rites before burial and provide an avenue to serve the dead during the wake. This is on the premise that a dignified death is something earned, and death with dignity is likened to life with dignity.

**Theme 3. In-person goodbye rituals.** Death is a collective phenomenon and expressions of grief following the loss of love one had been part of the Cebuano's culture. Public viewing and presence during prayers and novenas are held as norms across time. Relatives and friends reunite as they publicly pay respect and honor with the deceased. In places with active transmission of COVID-19, all funerals and mourning gatherings, whatever the cause of death are modified as a response to the health crisis. Not being present during the final moments to say farewell to the deceased and not able to express grief publicly has run counter to the belief that death is a collective phenomenon. Distance burials and bereavement experiences emerged as subtheme which are supported by the participants' vignettes.

**Expressing grief publicly.** When someone dies, friends and relatives gather for a tribute and bid farewell. Goodbye rituals are events where the dead, their good deeds and words are

remembered, where emotional support lessens the pain associated with the loss, and where conversations among friends and dear ones soothe the pain. To Carr et al. (2020), these give shape to grief in a historical sense. All these were not experienced by the participants. According to them:

Only the immediate family members are present at the two-day funeral wake, no neighbors, not even the closest friend. People are prohibited from gathering. (SP-05)

The official from the local government unit facilitated the burial. The family was just informed. The hospital coordinated with the LGU, the barangay officials, who in turn informed the concerned family. (SP-02)

During the funeral wake, conversations are not always about the dead. It is also the time to reunite with the relatives whom we missed seeing for some time. During the burial, nobody was allowed to walk. In the live coverage I saw, only the immediate family members were there. Food in the cemetery was not allowed too. (SP-09)

The actualization of the various funeral rituals signifies that the dead are worthy enough to be

remembered. Throwing of coins, giving of 'abuloy' or alms for the dead, the novena, and requiem mass offered for the repose of the soul of the deceased person were still regarded and understood in terms of cultural and religious embeddedness. With the alterations social, and psychological support for the bereaved has gone missing.

### **Feelings about the current burial practices**

The participants expressed their feelings toward the suppression of traditional funeral practices. Analysis of their narratives led to the emergence of two themes: deprivation of opportunities to convey love and respect and the challenge of their beliefs of a good death.

**Theme 1. Deprived to convey love and respect for the deceased.** Missing the usual opportunity to express goodbye made the participants feel deprived of the opportunity to convey their love and respect towards the deceased and the bereaved family. They longed to have the traditional wake, the proper burial, and the gathering of close friends and relatives.

It is saddening, not only because there was no vigil, but on the bereaved. It always feels good to have joined by others during the wake, to listen to their expressions of condolences. On the other hand, it is also stressful to monitor and update the group chat just so everyone can be updated. (SP-03)

I feel guilty. I would have wanted to serve even at the last moments of my father. He was out most of the time because of his work. At least before his

burial, I could have offered my services. Other relatives could have been here sharing and comforting us. (SP-13)

When my niece died due to COVID, she was placed in a body bag and then transported to the cemetery. Only one of her children was allowed, though from afar, to be in the cemetery at that time. It was 5 AM, and the rite to committal was not performed. (SP-14)

It is difficult to think that we are not free to do our funeral rituals due to the pandemic. With the protocol, crossing borders was a real challenge. There were so many restrictions like mass gatherings. I am mindful of these protocols since I am a government employee. I should be set as an example not to violate the health protocols. (SP-08)

Not being able to pay tribute to the deceased can be disappointing, and the various notions of a good death are culture-based. Through time, there were changes in these notions. Walter (2003), on the historical and cultural variants of the good death, purported that the ideas about good death are influenced by

religion. Similarly, Good Death (2013) highlighted that as the community performs their ritual obligations, spirits become contented and will not linger for a long time. Instead, they will continue their journey to the land of the dead.

**Theme 2: Educated on the beliefs of a good death.** A deeper analysis of the participants' narratives led to the second theme of being educated about their beliefs about a good death. While they remained hopeful, they have been catechized on the many ways to express and ensure a dignified death of a loved one, acknowledging that grief and mourning can be done remotely and through a different platform in lieu of the in-person meeting. Moreover, the new funeral rites do not totally change the value system attached to the rituals; rather, these were just bent to address the IATF guidelines on the management of dead bodies during the COVID-19 pandemic.

I am hopeful that things will become normal. Fulfillment and satisfaction that there is God. One of the tasks of the church is to give a dignified burial to our brothers and sisters. Our guarantee to them is to follow the safety protocol first. I need to assure the people that even though there was no mass celebrated before the burial, what is important are the prayers. Prayers transcend after burying them. Our prayers are more important. Certain beliefs were changed. COVID-19 has taught us how to regard our funeral practices. Number 1,

it was a place to catechize. The souls need more prayers than anything else—not even food. People have been catechized to this. One of the ways to show our love to them is through our prayers. (SP-11)

I understand there are other ways to express your deepest sympathy to the bereaved. Although I felt sad for not having the *misa* requim before the burial. At least there should have been the funeral liturgy, but it was not allowed. (SP-05)

Thanks to social media. It really helped. Also, even from afar, we can send our donations, though how small, through GCash or bank transfer. (SP-09)

On a personal note, I am a little sad. I grew up in a generation where I have all these funeral traditions. I cannot speak for my child since she did not experience those. The most important is the human connection. Although having social media is advantageous, nothing replaces personal experience when you really feel the sincerity. Yes, while watching the live coverage of the burial, it is always different when I am physically present during the burial. (SP-15)

The pandemic has catechized the people on how to express grief and sympathy towards the bereaved was shown in a different way. Creativity was shown when social media platforms were utilized as a means to connect the loved ones from afar and be witnesses of funeral or commemorative events. However, there was anxiety and alienation at the onset. They have realized the many ways the new rituals have helped maintain the tradition in a unique manner. In other words, the views of what constitutes a good death have gradually been influenced by changed conditions of life due to the COVID-19 transmissibility issues. The theme from the participants' vignettes is supported by the study of Gafaar et al. (2020) on the participants' perceptions and attitudes toward a good death. Grief coping, emotional wellness, and spiritual wellness were identified as first-order themes.

### **Conclusion**

The traditional funeral practices have been ingrained in the hearts and minds of the Cebuanos. The traditions are rooted in the rich ancestral veneration and stem from solid and close family ties. The imposition of health protocols has considerably altered the practices that require physical gatherings of the bereaved family and significant others. While the traditions are held and valued, the implementation is reshaped in consideration of compliance with the safety measures brought by COVID-19. The funeral rituals are not changed at all. Prayers and all other forms of mourning are not prohibited; only physical mass gathering was not allowed. The alterations of the practices, including prolonged and public viewing, mass gatherings during the novena and requiem mass, physical attendance to burial services, and commemorative events, provided the Cebuanos an avenue to be creative in expressing their grief and mourning. Social media platforms and communications technologies have been instrumental in keeping the human connection and in actualizing death as a collective phenomenon. Funeral arrangements have evolved following the government's protocol on the management of COVID-19. The state-mandated guidelines served as the basis for local health practitioners and local government units to enforce safety among family members and the community of mourners. Hence, the dignity of the dead as well their cultural-religious

rights remain respected despite the adaptations of bereavement and funeral practices to prevent the danger of contagion.

### **Recommendations**

Challenged by the social construction of death and the differing beliefs on what constitutes a good death through the observance of funeral rituals, initiatives may be advanced. The Catholic church may advance initiatives to strengthen its ministry to the deceased and their family, strengthening catechism on the many ways of actualizing the principal ritual moments- vigil and related rights and prayers, funeral liturgy, and rite of committal.

With the alterations of funeral services, culturally bound and technology-aided death care services may be proposed and enacted to provide the society with informed choices on managing funerals. A closer public service partnership may be forged between local government units and religious communities related to the changing traditions of funerals during a pandemic. Similarly, institutions and government agencies may consider the immense role of digital technology in connecting people, such as providing access to a live-streamed funeral or holding online commemorative events.

Utilizing all possible means, may the church leaders invest every effort to educate everyone on the purpose of doing the rituals. Prayers transcend after burial. More than any material thing, one can offer the love shown through prayers. Vigil service, which is a public norm, can be celebrated virtually with or without the remains of the deceased, and the rite of committal can be performed with or without the family members present during the interment. With this, a complete understanding of the community's culture, beliefs, traditions, and values is vital to design effective dead management plans during a pandemic.

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The authors declare that the research was conducted without any commercial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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