



WISCONSIN CATHOLIC CONFERENCE

TO: Senator Patrick Testin
Members, Senate Committee on Health

FROM: Kim Vercauteren, Executive Director, Wisconsin Catholic Conference

DATE: April 27, 2021

RE: Opposition to Senate Bill 228, Disposition of Human through Alkaline Hydrolysis

The Wisconsin Catholic Conference (WCC) appreciates the opportunity to offer testimony on behalf of the Roman Catholic bishops of Wisconsin in opposition to Senate Bill 228, which would allow for the disposition of human remains through alkaline hydrolysis.

Alkaline hydrolysis dissolves the deceased by placing the body in a vat of water and chemicals, which is heated until the body turns to liquid. The liquid is then treated as wastewater and either disposed of through a wastewater system or boiled away, leaving pieces of bone behind that can be ground or pulverized.

Catholic teaching is centered on the life and dignity of the human person because each person is created in the image and likeness of God. The human body is a physical, material manifestation of God's image and shares in that dignity (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 364). Even in death, we show reverence and compassion for God's creation by praying for and laying to rest the departed and caring for those grieving the death of a loved one.

The 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. (*CCC*, no. 2300).

The heart, mind, flesh, and bones of a human person are all elements of a unique creation, down to the DNA, which must be honored even after death. Our concern is that with alkaline hydrolysis, remains are washed into a wastewater system as though the body created by God never existed. Wastewater does not honor the sacredness of the body, nor does it allow the grieving to honor the dead after disposition.

Respect for the dead is a shared value protected and promoted by Wisconsin law. It is why state law instructs how and when a corpse may be moved (Wis. Stats. S. 69.18); how and when disposition may occur (Wis. Stats. Chapters 154 and 157), including cremation (Wis. Stats. Chapter 440); and why Wisconsin criminalizes the mutilation or hiding of a corpse (Wis. Stats. s. 940.11).

Alkaline hydrolysis is an aberration from the traditional treatment of human remains in

Wisconsin, which is acknowledged in the language of Senate Bill 228. Under the current Wisconsin Statutes s. 440.70(5):

“Cremated remains” means human remains recovered from the cremation of a human body or body part and the residue of a container or foreign materials that were cremated with the body or body part.

However, SB 228 specifically amends s. 440.70(5) to exclude “the sterile liquid resulting from cremation by alkaline hydrolysis.” This liquid is not considered part of the cremated remains, though it includes all the organic matter that makes up a human person. Senate Bill 228 treats much of the deceased as waste, not cremated remains under the law.

While the Church recognizes and permits cremation, it is allowed as a burial selection in addition to customary interment because the body may remain “as-one” even though it is reduced to ashes. Under Church teaching, respectful final disposition of cremated remains involves interment or entombment of all remains in the consecrated grounds of a cemetery. The body is sacred and is buried whole, even as ashes. This standard is impossible to maintain through alkaline hydrolysis.

The WCC is also concerned with using the mantle of stewardship and care for creation to validate the use of alkaline hydrolysis. The practice can use anywhere from 100 to 300 gallons of water and can influence pH levels in the water supply. We question whether a process that alters the chemical composition of large amounts of clean water, an increasingly diminishing resource, is good stewardship.

The Catholic Church is not opposed to more environmentally-conscience burial options. Wisconsin permits green burial and families may opt for a more direct burial, which does not require embalming and some of the other intervening steps that are traditionally included in a traditional burial.

In over 600 Catholic cemeteries throughout Wisconsin, our care for the departed continues and we remain committed to the ministry of respecting God’s image reflected in the human person. Alkaline hydrolysis does not align with the value and respect for the dead and the WCC strongly urges you to oppose Senate Bill 228.

Thank you.