



## *Speaking the truth in love*

*Eph 4:15*

27 May 2021

Dear brothers,

As you may have seen in the media this week, the NSW Government has announced that it will merge all cemetery trusts into a single government-run trust and to dismiss faith-based operators, including the Catholic Metropolitan Cemeteries Trust (CMCT). This decision will end the involvement of faith groups in the management and operation of cemeteries in favour of a secular government run bureaucracy. This will bring to an end more than 150 years of the Church's role in burying the dead, upkeep of the graves and support to grieving families.

For more than four years, CMCT, the Archdiocese as well as other religious groups have been in consultation with the State Government to try and find a solution to the issues currently facing Sydney cemeteries. The most significant of these issues are:

- a lack of burial space in Sydney cemeteries, with many of them expected to close to new internments in the next decade;
- the need for sufficient funds to be set aside for the ongoing maintenance of cemeteries; and
- the need to provide affordable funerals and burials for all people.

CMCT offered solutions that would solve each of these issues, and do so in a way that couple be implemented immediately at no cost to Government or taxpayer. The Government's decision will be significantly more costly, take a longer time to implement, and exclude religious groups from any involvement in operations. It makes no sense.

I am forwarding to you my opinion piece in *The Australian* (27<sup>th</sup> May) on this decision. Given the extraordinary manner in which the Government has gone about this and the extensive impact this will have on our community and Church, I ask that you alert your parishioners and parish communities to this latest development encourage them to write and or phone their local member of parliament in an appeal to reverse this decision.

Most Rev. Anthony Fisher OP, DD BA LIB BTheol DPhil  
Archbishop of Sydney

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They might also consider encouraging friends elsewhere in NSW to do the same. You may wish to consider the following points:

1. Caring for the dead is a spiritual mission, not secular. Our faith teaches that it is one of our “corporal works of mercy” and this underpins the way we look after our cemeteries. The government seems to only really recognise cemetery property as a monetary asset without sensitivity to its spiritual element or the wishes of families of the deceased.
2. The Catholic Cemetery Trust has successfully and reverently managed Catholic cemeteries for more than 150 years. How can the government claim to the legacy of over 15 decades of care and reverent upkeep, as well as tens of thousands of dollars-worth of pooled assets from Catholic families for the maintenance of our cemeteries, without even proper consultation?
3. The decision raises uncertainty about whether graves will be kept in perpetuity. A secular bureaucracy that does not appreciate the reverence needed to be shown to the deceased could be tempted to reuse graves to make more space.
4. The cost of burials will almost certainly increase, because the cemeteries will no longer be operated by charitable providers.
5. This does not just affect Catholic communities but also Muslim, Jewish and other Christian and non-Christian communities whom the Catholic Cemeteries Trust has been supporting these past years.
6. The government suddenly announced this decision without adequately consulting the Church and other faith leaders, evidently emboldened by the results of the Upper Hunter by-election. The brazen disregard for people of faith and their works does not bode well for the manner in which the government may deal with Catholic funerals and graves in the future.

I appreciate your support in this matter. Please be assured of my ongoing prayers for you all in your ministry.

Yours fraternally in Christ

A handwritten signature in green ink that reads "+ Anthony Fisher OP". The signature is written in a cursive style with a small cross at the beginning.

Most Rev. Anthony Fisher OP, DD BA LIB BTheol DPhil  
Archbishop of Sydney

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# Caring for the dead is a spiritual mission, not secular

ANTHONY FISHER

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

Catholic Archbishop of Sydney

since 2014.