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The Christian Way of Death
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Religions across the world reveal a variety of different ways to dispose of a body once a person dies. Some burn the body and send the ashes floating on a sacred river, others let the body dry out and then gather the bones into an ossuary, while others expose the body to be eaten by vultures.

Although Christianity never indulged in anything as exotic as vultures or even river trips, there is an interesting tale in the changes to burial practices as the polytheistic Roman Empire became Christian in the fourth and fifth centuries A.D.

This transformation appears clearly in the ancient city of Rome. Like all major cities of the ancient world, Rome was surrounded by a wall. The pagans of the Roman world, like the ancient Jews, buried their dead outside the wall. With few exceptions, dead bodies were not permitted to remain within the city, for they were considered to be religiously impure and capable of polluting the temples to their gods and goddesses.

Wealthy families purchased plots of land outside the wall where they built massive tombs to bury generations of their dead. Even today, if you walk along the Appian Way (the ancient road from Rome to Appia), you can see the ruin of tombs from many rich families. These tombs were built as monuments honoring the deceased.

Every road out of Rome had an area lined with these tombs. This area was called a "necropolis." Since "polis" means "city," a Roman graveyard of tombs was literally a "city of the dead." Romans cremated their dead and so the tombs contained urns of ashes.

At Rome, Christianity changed this way of death. Christians buried their dead not in a necropolis, but in a "cemetery." This word comes from the Greek verb "koimao," which means "to fall asleep."

This is related to the Biblical passage of 1st Thessalonians 4:13-17, which reads in part, "God will

bring with him those who have fallen asleep ... the dead in Christ will rise first." On this Scriptural passage, Christians built a theology that saw the dead as "sleeping," instead of being completely finished with life. So rather than cremate the bodies, Christians buried them as whole corpses, as if they were sleeping, so they would be ready to rise at the coming of Christ.

This theological shift had a practical consequence. Since the dead were "sleeping," Christianity did not consider them impure, as did the pagan religions.

The most striking example of this shift came from Emperor Constantine in the early fourth century. The bones of St. Peter, who had been crucified in Rome, were buried in the necropolis to the west of the city. Constantine decided to build a cathedral over these remains to honor them. He constructed a massive church in the necropolis, which became the center of Christianity in Rome and to which large numbers of people came to worship, some on a religious basis and others as a pilgrimage.

Rome's western necropolis thus changed from a pagan necropolis containing impure dead to a Christian cemetery containing pure "sleepers," to a hallowed (or holy) site of the important Christian cathedral of St. Peter. Indeed, we could understand St. Peter's as being sanctified by the relics of Peter, the Saint whom the cathedral honors, and it in turn sanctifying those buried within and near it.

As Christianity supplanted polytheism in the city of Rome, St. Peter's and other churches and cathedrals were incorporated into the growing metropolis. The cemeteries and tombs associated with those institutions became part of the city as well. The dead were no longer excluded from the city, but became a key part of it. Over the coming centuries, this new Christian way of death would spread across the Empire, Christian Europe, and beyond.