Taking time out to bury the dead

In today's fast-moving world, everything is focused on instant satisfaction – fast food, mobile banking, microwaves and instantaneous communication. Gone are the times when one would take the time to write a letter and post it knowing that it might take up to a week to be received by the intended person.

Unfortunately, this culture of getting things done as quickly as possible has impacted the way we perform the corporal work of mercy of burying the dead. Too many families approach handling of death as something to get done and over with. The cheapest, fastest method of handling a deceased body is to have it cremated and either scatter the ashes or take the cremated remains home to sit on a mantle place or shelf – that is, until it is in the way and ultimately ends up in a closet or attic.

This work of mercy calls us to go beyond this simplified, speedy process. We are called to treat the dead "with respect and charity, in faith and hope of the Resurrection" (Catechism of the Catholic Church, No. 2300). Offering prayers through the liturgies of vigil, funeral and committal does this. Having the remains of the deceased properly buried or entombed in a cemetery or mausoleum, either in full-body or cremated form, is a further way in which we treat the dead with respect and charity.

Our outreach to those who are facing death either personally or through the death of a loved one is part of this corporal work of mercy. Take time to listen compassionately to those who are grieving. The sharing of memories is a good way for those who grieve to reconcile themselves with the loss. Remember that grieving does not end with the burial. Offer to assist with daily chores or bring meals while encouraging them

to take care of themselves. Grief has no schedule. Many years after the death of a significant member in one’s life grief still can take over unexpectedly. Accommodate someone in their grief while encouraging them to develop a life where their relationship with the person who has died has changed.

Having Masses said for a deceased person acknowledges the value of that person in the world and in the lives of their family members. The Catholic Church celebrates The Commemoration of All the Faithful Departed each year on the day following the solemnity of All Saints Day. This day, commonly referred to as All Souls’ Day, calls us to remember departed loved ones in prayer and through visitation to their final resting place. Most Catholic churches and cemeteries hold special Masses on these days.

So, how do we practice the corporal work of mercy of burying the dead? By deed, word and prayer. Arrange for proper and respectful burial or entombment of the remains of the deceased. Reach out with words of compassion and love to those who are grieving, and ensure that all of the faithful departed are honored with the appropriate funeral liturgy and other Masses over time.