



UK Health Alliance on Climate Change

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Why I wish they had composted the Pope

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As I wrote this piece, Pope Benedict XVI was being buried, but I wish he had been composted. Nature would have been respected, greenhouse gas emissions would have been reduced, and in little more than a month the Vatican would have had a bag of rich soil that could be used to grow something in the garden where the dead Pope spent his final years. The soil might even be used to grow food, perhaps carrots to feed people who are poor. But most importantly a signal would have been sent to the world that composting is the best way to dispose of the dead.

The dead 95 year old Pope was inside a huge, wooden coffin. I'm not sure why it needed to be so big, and I don't know if his body was embalmed—but I hope not. Some 50 000 people gathered for the funeral, and millions must have been watching on television. Once the funeral was over the dead Pope was buried in a crypt below St Peter's Basilica that already contains more than 90 dead Popes. The carbon footprint of the funeral was substantial.

I don't know if composting of dead bodies is allowed in Italy or Vatican City, but I suspect not as the Catholic church seems to be against it. Composting is now allowed in six American states and saves about 1.4 tonnes of carbon being released into the atmosphere compared with cremation or a traditional burial. (A return flight from London to New York is about 1 tonne.)

The company Recompose has adapted the method used for animals with Professor Lynne Carpenter-Boggs from Washington State University so that it can be used to compost human corpses.¹ The body is put in a box with wood chips and other composting material. The box is heated to 55 C, which encourages the thermophilic microbes to do their work and destroys pharmaceuticals and pathogens. Rich soil is available in a month.

Recompose charges about \$7000, which is comparable to the average US figures of about \$8000 for a burial or \$7000 for a cremation. Competition from new companies, more people opting for composting, and a carbon tax should all make composting cheaper.²

The Catholic Church could no doubt have afforded the \$7000, but the BBC reports that Catholic bishops have opposed composting, arguing that human bodies should not be treated like "household waste."³ I'm no theologian, but I don't understand these objections. The church believes that the soul is separate from the body, and isn't it the soul that heads to heaven, hell, or purgatory? Does the church still believe in the resurrection of the body? I don't think it does, but even if it does, isn't a bag of soil preferable to a decayed corpse or skeleton?

The saving of 1.4 tonnes of carbon from composting Pope Benedict XVI would make little difference to the ecological crisis, but the message and symbolism of him being composted would be huge. The Catholic Church has 1.3 billion followers with about nine million dying each year. Composting those nine million would save vast amounts of greenhouse gases and generate lots of rich soil. And the Pope being composted might have wider influence among the 60 million people who die each year.

I think of the influence of Catherine the Great, the vaccine queen, having her children vaccinated, or Queen Victoria opting for chloroform during childbirth despite a male theologian being against it because of the "natural and physiological forces that the Divinity has ordained us to enjoy or to suffer." (The "us" of course doesn't in this case include men.)

The opportunity to compost this Pope has been lost, but there will be other high profile figures who could lead the way in the future. The encyclical from Pope Francis *On Care For Our Common Home* is one of the world's most impressive documents on the ecological crisis.⁴ He will surely not miss the opportunity to be composted. King Charles III is another likely candidate.

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1 <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/science-environment-51389084>

2 <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-64140571>

3 <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-64140571>

4 https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html