

# Denied funeral rituals in pandemic times: funeral workers' experience with 'contagious corpses'

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## Abstract

The extremely high death rates in northern Italy during the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic called for exceptional rules and suspension of funeral practices and burial rites. Additionally, forms of collective burial, typical of a wartime scenario, and mechanical methods and timing were reintroduced into the handling of corpses. Although several academic studies have highlighted how the absence of funeral ceremonies and 'dignified burials' has caused prolonged and deep suffering for the mourners and for many of the caregivers and health workers, few have so far focused on funeral workers. This article focuses on the intimate, emotional and ethical experiences of a group of funeral workers in northern Italy who handled COVID corpses and had to take the place of the mourners at the time of burial. Through an anthropological analysis of their oral memories, this work attempts to analyse their expressions of discomfort, frustration, fear and suffering.

**Key words:** pandemic, funeral rituals, funeral workers, compassion fatigue, contamination, COVID-19

## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

The COVID-19 pandemic that began to circulate in Europe and other countries around the world in 2020 marked an exceptionally dramatic moment in the everyday relationship between the living and the dead. The absence of funeral rites, the loneliness in the death of millions of sick people, the handling and transport of coffins by inappropriate means and methods, and abuses by the media in showing images of stacked coffins triggered a sense of collective suffering. All of the above led to a reflection and ethical concerns about morality in the current public health system<sup>2</sup> and to a debate on the importance of the ethical–moral dimension of handling corpses in contemporary society.<sup>3</sup>

Over the past two years, numerous studies in the psychology and anthropology of mourning have focused on post-traumatic symptoms in COVID mourners. Their work shows how the causes of this suffering are directly attributable to the behavioural norms imposed during the pandemic to protect individual



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and collective health. Restrictions concerned both the social and ritual spheres.<sup>4</sup> According to these studies, the rules that imposed segregation at home and separation of the healthy and the sick, and that forbade the accompanying of loved ones at the time of death, were perceived as particularly severe and traumatic. Among them, the most painful was to be unable to celebrate a proper funeral ritual.<sup>5</sup> Along this line, recent work in psychology has been devoted to the post-traumatic symptoms that many healthcare operators working in intensive care units or nursing homes experienced during the pandemic.<sup>6</sup>

To date, very few studies in scientific research have been devoted to analysing the same symptoms in workers of the funeral and mortuary sector who were in close contact with COVID-infected corpses.<sup>7</sup> The present analysis can therefore be linked to the discussion launched by French and Swiss colleagues.<sup>8</sup> Using an anthropological lens, research carried out in 2021 collected a group testimony (forty-eight persons) from funeral parlours in two of the hardest-hit provinces of northern Italy – Bergamo (Lombardy region) and Vicenza (Veneto region). A small sample of additional interviews (six) with funeral workers in the city of Milan (Lombardy region) are also integrated. The material in this research centres on the work choices and the emotional dimensions of funeral operators involved in the management of COVID corpses. What consequences did the absence of rituals produce in their relationship with death? How were these bodies treated when they ‘departed’ from the earthly dimension without any rituals or the affection of their families?

To answer such questions an in-depth analysis was carried out focusing on those who were in direct contact with COVID-related deaths, who followed them through all of their final stages and who survived. Funeral workers are an ‘intermediate’ figure between the living and the dead. According to their testimonies, during the pandemic they felt immersed in the world of the dead, just barely surviving. This recalls the concept of a ‘grey zone’ described by Primo Levi:<sup>9</sup> contrary to the case of Nazi collaborators, here the dimension of ethics and morality was always present. Primo Levi wrote:

It is natural and obvious that the most consistent material to reconstruct the truth about the camps is the memories from the survivors. [...] Years later, it can be said today that the history of the Lagers was written almost exclusively by those who, like myself, did not plumb the depths. Those who did never returned, or else their power to observe was paralysed by suffering and incomprehension.<sup>10</sup>

The present article highlights explicit and implicit messages from the testimonies of Bergamo and Vicenza’s funeral workers, using the analytical tools of the anthropology of memory, psychology and trauma studies. The first part introduces the emotional dimension of funeral workers and their narrative choices in describing those moments. This process reveals the contradictions and ambivalences that characterised their tragic experience. The second part of the article introduces the strategies employed by some funeral workers to alleviate the suffering of mourners,

proposing some alternative forms of funeral ritual. The latter shed new light on the power of ritual, where funerary rituals in particular can drive new forms of solidarity, affectivity and compassion.<sup>11</sup>

### **The ambiguous relationship between the ‘pain of the farewell’ and the ‘burden of corpses’**

In mid-February 2020, northern Italy became the first epicentre for the spread of the COVID-19 virus throughout Europe.<sup>12</sup> Within weeks, some provinces in the Lombardy region (Milan, Lodi, Bergamo) became the places where the effects of the epidemic revealed their hardest and cruellest face. According to data available today, the official number of deaths caused by COVID-19 in Italy in 2020 was 744,000,<sup>13</sup> almost 90 per cent<sup>14</sup> of which were attributed to the presence of the virus as either the main cause or concause.<sup>15</sup> In the province of Bergamo alone, almost 6,000 deaths occurred during the month of March,<sup>16</sup> i.e. in the period defined as the ‘first wave’. However, it is worth noting that the data are still partial, due to the lack of health protocols and scarcity of COVID tests in the first months of the pandemic.

On 9 March 2020, well in advance of the health policies of all other European countries, the Italian government announced a state of ‘national health emergency’.<sup>17</sup> Among the various measures that were put in place to protect public health were those related to closing places of worship and the suppression of all collective rituals – including all funeral rituals. Faced with this scenario, the anthropologist Fabio Dei wrote that ‘the most inhuman aspect of this experiment of suspended sociality to which we are forced, even more cruel than the dystopian imagery ventilated by those philosophers who fear our reduction to bare life, is the denial of the rituals deputed to accompany mourning’.<sup>18</sup>

In epidemic periods, society can assume a complex relationship with the corpse which corresponds to a cyclical historical reality experienced by all human societies.<sup>19</sup> However, during the 2020 pandemic this relationship revealed some dramatic and disturbing features. During the first pandemic period (February–May 2020), the lack of precise information about the virus contagion, and fear that the bodily fluids of the corpse could facilitate the spread of the disease, all the treatments usually carried out on corpses became complex. Should COVID corpses be treated like ‘contagious bodies’? In this regard, it is interesting to note that, according to some accounts, in the Vicenza hospital the first COVID deaths were treated using the same protocol as for AIDS deaths in the early 1990s. In the face of an unknown and deadly virus, COVID deaths, like those from AIDS, were instinctively considered to be one of the main sites of contagion.

I saw inside the morgue how they treated the first COVID deaths. They would put the bodies naked and sprinkle them with alcohol to disinfect and then inside a sealed bag. Then they would seal the coffin. It was the same treatment that was done in the 1990s for AIDS deaths. I remember that period well, and I immediately

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thought of it as soon as I saw it done in 2020. Inside the hospital in those days there was fear, everyone was terrified. (Interview, funeral operator, Vicenza, 28 August 2021)

The concept of ‘contamination’ corresponds to a theme that has been particularly dear to anthropological studies since the early days of the discipline. As Mary Douglas describes,<sup>20</sup> this concept is usually associated with a perception of danger, vulnerability and fragility. All these sensations are often accompanied by fear, anxiety and distress. This experience occurs following uncontrolled contact with a body or object considered ‘dangerous’ as a carrier of malignant energy, or as a generator of chaos and death. According to Douglas’s theory, the danger of such a body is due mainly to its location in an unsuitable place, outside a controlled area: this potentially dangerous object is therefore in a different place than the one that is usually assigned to it. In this sense, a sacred object is potentially positive when it is located in the place that the community considers appropriate, but that same object will turn into an extremely dangerous and contaminating element when it is moved to an inappropriate place.

According to Douglas, therefore, the condition of ‘dangerousness’ of that object is not because of its being in itself, but because of its being placed in an unsuitable place. Within this context, which generates anxiety and concern in the entire community, the role of ritual action emerges. It corresponds to that gesture or set of culturally determined actions that allow the dangerous object to be touched and handled in a ‘safe’ manner; that is, without the contact becoming a source of contagion. This ritual gesture will be aimed at neutralising the negativity of the object and returning it to its original position or to the appropriate place. The inherent characteristic of the ritual action would thus be that of protection towards the person performing the action, allowing the gesture of ‘transformation’ to take place without danger.<sup>21</sup>

## The ethical and moral dimension in ritual contact with the corpse

The pandemic context in Italy has highlighted the complexity of physical contact with the corpse, considered by most societies worldwide as contaminated. In ‘normal’ times, contact with the corpse is assigned to a group of professionals (nurses and funeral workers) who know how to perform appropriate ritual actions on the corpse when handling it from the death bed to the morgue and finally to the cemetery.<sup>22</sup> They are also trained to perform a set of actions that prepare the body to be ‘seen’ by the community of the living, particularly the bereaved, to give the last the ritual farewell and then seal the coffin.<sup>23</sup>

However, on particular occasions such as pandemics, where the threat of contamination by contact and the fear of death become an out-of-control element, the corpse once again becomes perceived as contagious, leading to death par excellence. In 2020, several national governments, including the Italian government, considered it a priority to eliminate all ‘unnecessary contacts’ with the corpse in order to limit the risk of viral contagion. Ritual contact was included among these

norms. Soon after, this decision revealed the fragility and problematic nature of such a perspective on death, which led to a series of emotional and moral problems within society.

The dimension of death, the relationship with the corpse and the burial rite correspond to fundamental moments within any society.<sup>24</sup> A death and the presence of the corpse are not only forms of destruction and crisis: they correspond, in some ways, to a start in construction of the meaning of the entire existence, both individual and collective.<sup>25</sup> Consequently, the danger of the corpse corresponds to its position between the world of the living and that of the dead. To avoid any risk of contagion, any physical contact with this body must be carried out in accordance with a ritually established manner and timing, so that society can once again be inhabited only by the living.<sup>26</sup>

In addition to the pragmatic aspect, the role played by any funeral ritual in the emotional dimension within society must also be considered, both at the collective and individual level. Indeed, death causes drama and a sense of emptiness in the community, due to the loss of one of its members. In this sense, funeral practice can help people who are grieving, so that they can make the emotional transitions necessary to accept and process this loss.<sup>27</sup> According to Frazer's studies,<sup>28</sup> two different emotional dimensions emerge within the expressions of mourning: on the one hand, the sense of fear in relation to death; on the other, a sense of 'respect and affection for the souls of the deceased'. It is, according to Frazer, an ambivalent attitude that is characteristic of the essence of funeral rites.

Mourning is these two things at the same time. On the one hand, it presents itself as an irresistible attraction for the subject to leave with his deceased loved ones, or to hold them back, because they represent a part of himself. On the other hand, it expresses the need to move the corpse away to continue with life. Mourning rituals feature this fundamental ambivalence. And they elaborate it through a series of concrete practices that are performed on the corpses.<sup>29</sup>

The whole issue raised by the pandemic situation in Italy pivots around these points, dominated by an unusual situation of collective mourning and by the ban on any funeral rituals. As will be seen in this article, the testimonies of the funeral workers show the level of suffering which they experienced at that time and in the months that followed, when in contact with death without the ritual 'healing' action. The testimonies disclose the level of ambivalence in the intimacy of these people, dominated not only by a feeling of attachment and respect towards the corpses, but also by repulsion and fear, and also by the deep sense of guilt which they nurture to this day, for not having been able to 'do their job properly'.<sup>30</sup> All these elements have favoured the spread of symptoms that psychology defines as 'pathological mourning' or 'complicated mourning'.<sup>31</sup> The term 'endless' or 'pathological' mourning suggests a mourning process that has not developed in its proper time and manner, i.e. in ways that can facilitate a serene separation between family members and the deceased.<sup>32</sup>

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According to studies in psychology, funeral workers have recently been identified as a category of workers that are most at risk in terms of a person's psycho-physical balance.<sup>33</sup> According to a study conducted in northern Italy just before the pandemic, the main causes of fragility in the psycho-physical balance of these workers include the constant co-presence of a multiplicity of actions, gestures and situations linked to proximity to and prolonged physical contact with the corpse. The combination of elements causes an emotional state of prolonged sadness, but also a dimension of risk to one's own health (physical and emotional). The concept of 'compassion fatigue' defines this emotional situation of prolonged grief drama, which is characteristic of funeral workers.<sup>34</sup> The term will be used several times in this article, underscoring how this condition of emotional stress reached severe levels during the pandemic, which are now reflected in symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) from which many of them suffer.

### Chronology of the stages of transformation of funeral work during the pandemic in Italy

The Italian pandemic was characterised by situations of emotional distress similar to those already described. The unexpected situation of mass mortality that struck northern Italy shed unprecedented light on the complexity of our contemporary society in regard to the intimate, theoretical, moral and sanitary sphere connected to death. Institutions took the stance of privileging the defence of 'every life' above any risk of infection and death. This led to extreme dialectics on the 'living' and the 'dead', i.e. who should be 'saved' and who should be labelled as an 'enemy'.<sup>35</sup> Within this scenario, COVID deaths ended up being considered as 'contagious', 'inconvenient' and 'dangerous' bodies that had to be quickly disposed of.

If on a purely theoretical level, this reflection seems lucid and consistent; on a pragmatic level, it turned out to be convoluted, problematic and painful. Consequently, the health legislation and protocols that were drawn up in this context regarding the relationship with the corpse and its management in burials were also extremely confused, problematic and contradictory.

The Italian scene, from the beginning of March 2020, was characterised by a situation of uncertainty within the funeral industry. After an initial moment dominated by emotional challenges, anxiety and concern due to a lack of standards and official guidelines on how to deal with COVID corpses, a second period followed, marked by a state of confusion and chaos due to an excess of protocols and extraordinary ministerial guidelines. All this caused a series of conflicting, ambivalent emotions in funeral workers: anxiety, frustration, a sense of oppression, sadness, anger, despair and, often, guilt.

The date 9 March 2020 corresponds to a key moment in the memory of all funeral workers: it marks not only the official beginning of the 'national health emergency' in Italy, but also the beginning of new rules of social conduct imposed by the Ministry of Health on all funeral workers concerning the treatment of COVID corpses. The decree of 11 March ordered the closure of places of worship,

and all religious celebrations were prohibited until 3 May. Finally, the decree of 12 March prohibited the treatment of COVID corpses, considered infected.

The suite of sanitary regulations aimed to limit any possible physical contact between workers and the corpse, and any contact between the deceased and the bereaved. For this reason, after the ascertainment of death, the body had to be immediately placed in a biodegradable container (known as a 'sack') and put in a coffin. Consequently, the body placed in the coffin had no funerary treatment, nor dressing or mortuary care. Those who died in intensive care units in hospitals were laid in the coffin with the few undergarments they were wearing at the time.

The coffin was then sealed as quickly as possible: all ritual and emotional forms of separation between family members were thus cancelled. Gone were the last farewell, extreme unction, the ritual last kiss, the funeral procession, etc. In the case of the Catholic ritual, a prayer and blessing of the coffin were permitted at the time of burial in the cemetery in the presence of a clergyman, a few family members (a maximum of five) and the funeral service worker. During the pandemic it was not uncommon for immediate family members of the deceased to be ill or in quarantine at the time of burial. In all such cases, it was the cemetery director who attended the burial together with the funeral workers. These two figures thus became the formal representatives of the bereaved family members and assumed the emotional and moral responsibility (compassion fatigue).

Finally, it is worth noting that during this period most of those who died in a hospital or nursing home did so in a condition of loneliness and distance from family members. In such cases the death was communicated by telephone, hurriedly and in an anonymous manner, between a nurse and family member. At that point, the family member instructed a funeral agent to retrieve the body from the hospital morgue and accompany it directly to the cemetery or crematorium. The funeral agent was thus the sole figure to 'bridge' the gap between the bereaved family members and the deceased. In other words, he was the one who faced the emotions of the bereaved family members, and the one in contact with the deceased, seeing the person sealed in the coffin for the final farewell.

Faced with these challenges, the widespread symptoms of post-traumatic distress suffered by the bereaved in 2020 are understandable. They stem from problems connected to a 'prolonged mourning' due to a non-acceptance of the death of the family member. This results precisely from not being able to 'see' or 'touch' the body or the coffin, nor to pay their last respects or attend the burial.<sup>36</sup> Similarly, from my research, many funeral agents and cemetery directors in Bergamo and Milan experienced similar situations and are currently suffering from post-traumatic stress resulting from prolonged and excessive compassion fatigue during that period.

### **The suffering and frustration of funeral workers at the suppression of funeral rituals**

For funeral firms in northern Italy, the pandemic period brought a profound transformation to their work, on a pragmatic level, and to their intimate relationship

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with death. This refers to the ethical, moral and symbolic significance that these workers attributed to their work: they considered themselves to be carrying out a 'useful and necessary service' within the community, caring for the dead and helping the bereaved to traverse this passage.

In the first days of the pandemic, they experienced profound upheaval in their work, both pragmatically and in ethical and moral dimensions – all within just a few hours or days. In fact, they radically changed the meaning and role of their work: from 'masters of ceremonies' and 'funeral operators' they became 'mortuary workers'.<sup>37</sup>

This rapid and violent transformation is described in the testimonies collected here that express unease and suffering. They are correlated with feelings of frustration, anger and regret, caused by the workers' situation, during the pandemic, of not being able to carry out their work in the usual way. In other words, they speak of workers' suffering because they were unable to offer the deceased a 'dignified burial'.<sup>38</sup> These memories openly express grief and guilt towards both the deceased and the bereaved (their clients). There is, in many cases, a clear identification or empathy between the grief suffered by the bereaved family members and the grief expressed for the funeral workers, many of whom were also experiencing personal bereavements at the same time.

As described earlier, funeral workers ended up playing multiple roles between the bereaved family (shut in during lockdown) and the corpse, taking on (gesturally and morally) the role of family members in the last farewell and burial.

Most funeral parlour activities, as in the handling of the corpse and organisation of ritual activities, suddenly disappeared. Floral arrangements, the choice of coffin, the hearses, the distribution of epigraphs, organisation of the ceremony and funeral were quickly emptied of meaning and suppressed.

In their place, a series of much simpler and more mechanical, as well as anonymous, functions took place, dictated by the need to minimise effort and time in handling and transporting coffins. Several times during the interviews, workers recalled how the dimension of 'time' was always a fundamental dimension of their operations: in 'normal' periods there was a specific time for dressing, to prepare the funeral and handle the necessary bureaucracy, for the ritual and the burial. During the pandemic, the dimension of time underwent an abrupt change where all actions, mechanical in nature, had to be performed in the shortest possible time.<sup>39</sup>

From the beginning of the pandemic, the funeral workers' new role involved retrieving the corpses from morgues or private homes and placing them in boxes. Then, for a limited time, they left the coffins in a temporary mortuary space. After gathering all the necessary documentation, the funeral workers could move the coffin from the temporary space to the cemetery (for rapid burial) or to a crematorium. For both burial and cremation, the funeral ceremony was limited to a gesture of blessing the coffin and a simple prayer. This condition created a deep sense of unease and dismay among all funeral workers. They felt that they were not 'honouring' the corpse and not doing their job properly. In other words,



according to their testimonies, they felt guilty of acting, in their words, ‘violently’ and ‘disrespectfully’ towards the corpse.

Look, I’ll tell you honestly, I haven’t recovered yet. I usually avoid interviews and talking about these things . . . [...] Here in Milan, during the month of March, we buried fifty coffins a day. There was the blessing of the coffins, ten at a time, five times a day, at the cemetery entrance. There was the cemetery priest and myself in attendance, plus those from the funeral home. And then in the cemetery, making a mass grave . . . with the method that was used until the 1970s. At least here . . . Here, I feel like crying just thinking about those moments. (Interview, administrator of Milan’s Major Cemetery, male, Milan, 20 September 2021)

As the words suggest, during the months of March and April 2020, in areas with the highest concentration of deaths (the cities of Milan and Bergamo), cemetery managers had to apply collective burial techniques that had fallen into disuse since the 1970s. Moreover, both funeral workers and cemetery administrators, without the bereaved, had to attend all these burials several times a day. As the testimonies state, this extremely traumatic experience caused depression and unease during and after the critical period of 2020. To this day, several workers have been diagnosed with post-traumatic symptoms.

A comparison between the testimonies of female and male funeral workers in Bergamo and Vicenza revealed a non-random selection and redistribution of roles and tasks during the critical period. Women in fact, in many cases, took on the role of managing the administration and bureaucracy of the cases, but above all dealt with the emotional accompaniment of bereaved family members. This was done through telephone communication, but in some cases also through personal meetings. Meanwhile, men took on the more ‘manual’ tasks, as well as the transport of coffins, attending cemeteries and crematoriums. Men therefore, in most (but not all) cases, physically ‘escorted’ the corpses to their final destiny, while the women were in charge of the emotional accompaniment of the mourners. There were, however, different points of collaboration between men and women within the same funeral labour, especially in the moving and handling of coffins.

Many of the women devoted themselves to listening and consoling bereaved family members, trying to reassure them about the good state of their loved one’s coffin, offering photos or a short video of the moment of burial. This action stemmed from awareness of the need to offer an alternative and provide a service of reassurance in face of the trauma experienced by the mourners, who had received the news of their beloved’s death through an anonymous and hurried telephone message from a hospital nurse.

They were asking me, begging me to take a picture. We had a thousand phone calls where family members didn’t believe the person was dead. That they wanted proof. That they were asking us for explanations . . . We did what we could. (Interview, funeral operator R. M., female, Bergamo, 20 November 2021)

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People would come here, they would come to the office. Yes, I know you couldn't meet, but they came anyway. And they would sit in my office and talk and cry for hours. Because they had no one to listen to them, to tell their side of the story. Most of the family members suffered because they felt guilty. They felt they had abandoned their loved one. They felt guilty for having let their loved one die alone. (Interview, funeral operator L. C., female, Vicenza, 12 October 2021)

Here too, the presence of a marked compassion fatigue assumed by female workers within this critical situation can be noted. Driven by a strong empathy towards the grief, sense of loneliness and helplessness of the bereaved family members, these women took on roles of emotional support that went beyond their usual tasks. However, after the critical period, this type of experience later proved to be one of the main contributors to their prolonged emotional malaise.

### The manual and mechanical work of the funeral workers

As described above, in the recollections of funeral workers, the moment of *mise en bière* (laying out the corpse) came to acquire a central role in the representation of their activities during the pandemic. In general, this moment is accompanied by a strong sense of unease, which reiterates the reflection on the ambivalence of human emotions when faced with death as already described in the introduction.

During the pandemic period, the ritual act of *mise en bière*, usually full of symbolic content and the result of a balance between ethical–moral, cultural and physiological dimensions,<sup>40</sup> turned into a mechanical and repetitive action.

This experience corresponded, in fact, to an extremely painful and disturbing moment for the worker, a feeling of performing an act of violence not only towards the deceased, but also towards himself. Indeed, there was self-identification with the COVID corpse's condition of loneliness and 'dishonourable death'. Deprived of the protection usually afforded by ritual action and its symbolism,<sup>41</sup> the operator felt alone before the crude reality of the corpse. Disturbing and unbearable sensations that are characteristic of physical contact with a dead body<sup>42</sup> thus pervaded. Torn between a moral sense of honour towards the deceased, and a sense of fear and horror towards the body, the operator was therefore prey to a dimension of ambivalence and pain towards the phenomenon of death that has been described by De Martino.

Throughout my research, the tragic dimension experienced by funeral workers in being obliged to 'box in' the dead as if they were merchandise was conveyed to me through gestures and silences rather than words.

The first instance of this happened in an interview in Bergamo. The witness (R. C., pseudonym), head of a funeral company, caught up in the emotions of remembering that period, enacted before me the mechanical action of *incassare* ('boxing in') the corpses. She then began to imitate, with her hands and body, those actions that she had performed many times in March 2020. R. C. then began to simulate the movement of lifting and moving a coffin into a box and closing it. She then simulated moving the coffin from the floor to the hands of an (invisible) colleague.

It was a series of automatic and precise actions within a sequential movement between several people.

Suddenly, seized by a deep sense of unease, the woman stopped and looked at me in silence. She looked at her hands with an expression of fear and horror (perhaps at herself). In a firm voice she said to me: 'Let's stop here. Please turn off the tape recorder. Let's finish the interview here' (Interview, funeral operator, R. C., female, Bergamo, 29 August 2021).

A similar situation occurred in another interview. In this case a funeral director said that his most dramatic moment during the pandemic was having to move the coffins from the morgue to the van, loading them, one after the other, as if they were goods. He said he felt immense pain at that moment. During the story, the interviewee stopped talking and showed me his bare arm. He told me that he would keep that experience marked in his body forever: he was referring to the tendon laceration he had as a consequence of the constant action of 'picking up', 'boxing in' and moving the coffins (Interview, funeral operator, S. T., male, Bergamo, 17 November 2021).

In my opinion, the constant use of the term 'boxing in' deserves special attention. The verb *incassare* in Italian means 'to place permanently in an appropriate cavity' (Feltrinelli Vocabulary), and has no explicit meaning within the funeral sphere. Its use by funeral workers to describe their work during the pandemic period reflects – in my opinion – the different moods that affected them. This term was in fact useful for the narrator to emphasise a necessary emotional distance between himself and the body of the deceased. Unregulated contact with the carnality of death is a source of suffering, but also of horror, despondency and loss of meaning. This is particularly evident within a society dominated by the concern to maintain and preserve the 'dignity of the human being' through a series of instruments and manipulations on the body. In that context, a corpse is usually regarded as 'potentially infectious' when it has not undergone mortuary treatment. In contrast, it assumes the status of 'honourable and dignified' if it has received treatment and handling prior to its *mise en bière*.<sup>43</sup>

I remember one morning when the undertaker arrived here. I offered him a coffee. He replied: 'Yes. Thank you, I really need it. I boxed in six last night.' [Silence and downcast eyes] Immediately I had a sense of horror at that word. But then I thought that he too . . . poor man . . . had to do that to make himself courageous and go on. (Interview, administrator of an old people's home, R. T., female, Vicenza, 18 October 2021)

The absence of the ritual gesture as a 'shield' or 'gentle' way of living through this moment conveyed to the funeral workers a feeling of anxiety, panic and bewilderment. Moreover, it transmitted to them, or those who forced them to perform this task, the image of being an 'amoral' or 'inhuman' person. All this within a hierarchical and authoritarian relationship with institutions that were perceived as insensitive, amoral and far removed from reality.

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At this point, it is interesting to note the elements that these testimonies have in common with those of some survivors of concentration camps or lagers in the Second World War. In particular, I am referring to works on morality entitled the 'unspeakable' and the 'survivor's burden' by Pollak and Levi, respectively.<sup>44</sup>

Honestly, for me . . . the worst moment is when I went to retrieve a person from the Negrar hospital in Verona. And I went into the room they used as a morgue for the COVID dead. It was horrible, I don't want to think about it anymore. I still have nightmares at night. There was no respect at all for the people and there were so many bodies all over the place. No respect. For me, when there is no respect for a dead person, as a society we are finished. (Interview, funeral operator, A. V., male, Vicenza, 4 May 2021)

In the eyes of many funeral workers, the 'sack' ended up representing the ultimate emblem of 'dishonour' of the corpse that the national health system imposed on them. On several occasions, they showed a willingness to mark a clear distance, especially in terms of ethical and moral responsibility.

We refused to call it a 'sack'. It sounded like 'garbage bag'. In fact, it was a disinfectant cloth, an airtight container. Institutions and colleagues trivially call it a 'sack' . . . But how can you tell a family member that your loved one was put in a sack?! We said that the body was sealed hermetically in a cloth. (Interview, funeral operator, T. A., male, Vicenza, 3 May 2021)

## The problematic absence of the ritual gesture in front of the corpse

Initially during the pandemic, from about 27 February to 10 March 2020, a rapid transformation of the intimate relationship between the funeral worker and the COVID corpse was observable.

The suppression of rituals and absence of a mourning community at the side of the coffin brought operators in contact with a naked body and the image of a death in solitude: all deeply disturbing aspects that touched them, as well as the bereaved family members.

This context of what is known as '*mala muerte*'<sup>45</sup> is often accompanied by feelings that forewarn of the same predestined end.

The starting point of this process can be traced to 9 March 2020, i.e. the date on which the ministerial rule was issued which stated that corpses were 'potentially contagious'. Funeral workers in Bergamo were aware that they were in the midst of 'mass mortality' and lacked the necessary health protection. Moreover, they were confused by all the different information that was circulating regarding the severity of the virus and its spread. However, in the first weeks of the pandemic (since 23 February 2020) they had dealt with the situation as a normal 'freak wave' with high mortality, treating COVID corpses very much like other cases.

It was only from 9 March onwards that some funeral workers began to experience ambiguous feelings and emotions towards the COVID corpses that they came

into contact with. These emotions are not narrated in a linear and conscious manner today, but can be recognised through the images, expressions or sensations used to describe that period. Practitioners specifically remember the smells emanating from those bodies, feeling a sense of nausea, but also suffering from feelings of fear, despondency, dizziness. In brief, the dominant emotions they experienced were of insecurity, vulnerability and fear.

The following is an excerpt from one of the most significant testimonies of this process. It concerns a funeral worker from Bergamo, A. T. (pseudonym), who tells me how he remembers perfectly the smell and colour of the corpse of the last lady he had dressed on 9 March 2020.

In those days we were in operational chaos . . . so much so that the circular came out preventing the bodies from being dressed, but I read it the next day. And I remember saying: 'Eh! Had I known this before!' [. . .] I remember the very strong smell of alcohol, perhaps the children, frightened by the COVID, had spread alcohol everywhere to disinfect. We took the lady downstairs, and I remember the daughter saying that she wanted her mother to be seen. And I told her: 'No madam, look you can't.' It was two o'clock in the morning. Finally, I told her: 'Look, don't worry. I'll dress your mother and bring her down to you.' Actually, I shouldn't have done that, but I hadn't read the circular. I only had time to read it two days later . . . I clearly recall going up the stairs, doing the physical labour, dressing the lady, and bringing her down. She stayed there until the documents arrived, days later. I think this was the last person I dressed, the first person whose funeral we could no longer do. And I remember in great detail the dressing process. I remember wearing the mask and the gloves, but not the overalls because they were finished. I remember exactly how I was dressed. (Interview, funeral operator, A. T., male, Bergamo, 12 November 2021)

The emotions expressed here are those of an ambiguous relationship between the sense of care and that of terror and growing anxiety about contact with a (potentially) contagious body. These workers demonstrate that they wanted to pay respect to the departed, maintaining continuity with their usual practices. But they also perceived an impulse to move away from this place and away from the body. In the detailed description of the smells, clothes and objects in that house, the narrator seems to want to convey how he felt at that moment: the environment was beginning to take on unpleasant features and to transmit frightening sensations to him.

Suddenly, for a professional with long-standing experience in the funeral industry, the relationship with the corpse became problematic: the body came to be perceived as cumbersome, dangerous, excessively heavy.

As Moisseff analyses, the ritual of mourning is determined by a precise location of the bodies, whose contact is always difficult and problematic, placed in a precise place, time and context.<sup>46</sup> The category of funeral parlours came into being to enable an individualistic relationship with the deceased, and it specialises in the organisation of ceremonies to celebrate those who have passed away.<sup>47</sup> In the case of the COVID-19 pandemic, the lack of adequate facilities, coffins, places and

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means of transport for the high number of deaths not only completely redefined the workers' professional status, but also disrupted the usual formalities observed in approaching the corpse. Hence bodies were left in hospital beds, coffins laid on the floor or stacked one on top of the other: a sacred space and modality in the handling of these bodies and their placement in space suddenly disappeared. The problematic extension of time and kilometre-long journeys for cremation implied non-confidential or obsequious treatment of coffins. The boundary between what is socially accepted and legitimised, and what is unbearable towards an object considered sacred, thus became blurred and fragmented. As Mary Douglas describes in her classic text, the same object outside the sacred context begins to be perceived as dangerous and contagious as well as arousing a feeling of danger both at the individual and collective level.<sup>48</sup>

## The new relationships between funeral workers and mourners

The ambivalent relationship between attraction and fear towards the corpse is taken up by De Martino in Italian anthropology, in his studies of folklore in southern Italy.<sup>49</sup> According to the anthropologist, the 'crisis of presence' of bereaved family members manifests itself through a form of depression or agitation. The emotions that dominate the bereaved family members are ambivalent: on the one hand, they would like to keep the dead with them; on the other hand, they would like to follow them to the beyond. According to De Martino, this crisis cannot be overcome individually.

The work of mourning is articulated according to norms of behaviour and language dictated by tradition. The ritual, with its automatisms and stereotypes, is the way in which the entire community huddles around the individuals stricken by the abyss of death. The ritual guides them, supports them, frees them from the unbearable responsibility of coping with the unspeakable.<sup>50</sup>

As described above, for funeral workers, the prohibition of treating, dressing and preparing the corpse ended up having negative effects on the emotional side as well. Not only did they lose their stage where they could display their *savoir faire* – preparing the body – but also their role in society. Moreover, their individual and solitary dimension in confronting the other's death was accentuated. Instead of feeling that they were 'accompanying' families in a delicate phase of separation from a relative, the funeral workers found themselves rigidly and strictly enforcing rules and measures, constructing traumatic separations between a corpse and its family.

However, it is interesting to observe how, within this scenario, many creative strategies emerged within most of the funeral establishments that tried to offer an alternative to the bereaved family member: a symbolic gesture, a photograph, a greeting from the window. These were small expedients that could create, on a symbolic level, an alternative moment as a 'last goodbye', as well as restoring a

sense of fulfilment and pride in their professionalism in caring for the bereaved of others.

In the Bergamo context, among the women's testimonies, there is heartfelt pride in mentioning a series of solutions that were activated in March and April. For example: passing under the window of the bereaved family's house with the hearse, stopping for a minute so that family members – in their forties – could symbolically say goodbye to their loved one; placing a flower on the coffin, making films or videoing with their mobile phones the moment of burial. These efforts involved, of course, a series of extra tasks for funeral operators: coordinating the transport of the coffin, the purchase of the necessary materials, etc.

That had become my job. Putting a rose on the coffin, coordinating the time the hearse passed under the window of the house where the quarantined family member lived. Warning them in time, so that they could give a final salute from the window, throw a flower. That flower and that gesture, that became my work at that moment. (Interview, funeral operator, R. C., female, Bergamo, 19 November 2021)

As is highlighted by some studies, the emotional dimension of funeral workers is taking on a preponderant role in defining new strategies of action, especially in their role as intermediaries between the deceased and the bereaved.<sup>51</sup> In this case, the strong pressure of the funeral agents' emotions in constructing a symbolic space of 'funeral rituality' can be observed. The above highlights the collective need to construct, through the ritual gesture, a 'meaning' in confronting death, so that it escapes the purely biological dimension and returns to the symbolic-ritual one.

In continuity with these experiences, during the second part of the pandemic, between the winters of 2020 and 2021, in Vicenza as well as in other parts of Italy and the world, the use of virtual means to propose an alternative form of funeral ritual had become widespread and came to be known as 'funerals via streaming': a strategy to 'virtually' construct affective and physical closeness that had been denied by security regulations.<sup>52</sup>

## Conclusions

Throughout this article, the testimony of funeral workers has disclosed information on lesser-known aspects related to pandemic management. But, above all, it has shown how 'direct contact' with a corpse which has (suddenly) become a 'contagious body' could be managed. Moreover, it reveals the emotional dimensions that accompanied COVID coffins up to the last moment, where funeral workers took on the emotions of the bereaved.

Secondly, this study has investigated the complex emotional issues that characterised the experience of funeral workers during the most critical moments of the pandemic. On the one hand, the emotional and physical traumas caused to them by the rapid transformation of their professional and social role – from 'funeral operator' to 'mortuary workers' – are recognised.<sup>53</sup> On the other hand, these same voices, through the use of certain images, expressions and specific memories, have allowed

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access to another aspect of the phenomenon – that is, to the profound, painful and often contradictory transformation of their intimate and affective relation with the COVID corpse. What emerges is the experience of a cold and emotionally unbearable encounter with the dimension of death without the mediation of the ritual act.

The experience of the pandemic has allowed funeral workers to become more aware of how (and to what extent) the ritual dimension does not merely represent the repetition of a customary gesture, or a simple element of continuity with past traditions similar to folklore, but continues to have a profound contemporary value as it takes on specific tasks and roles in the very moment of its *mise en scène*, as a gesture endowed with performative capacity. Ritual actions are therefore functional not only in the relationship between the deceased and the bereaved: they are also fundamental for the workers in contact with the corpse, as the ritual gesture conveys to them emotions of ‘tranquillity’, ‘well-being’, ‘security’. In other words, it represents a dimension, at both the collective and individual level, that allows ‘safe’ relations even with ‘disturbing’ or potentially dangerous bodies, as in the case of the corpse.

Contrary to the feelings of suffering that the workers described in having lost a ‘professional’ role in the management of funeral rituals, their task during the pandemic had them playing essential, extremely diversified and complex roles that went beyond those of ‘manual and mechanical work’. The testimonies reported here have highlighted the multiple roles and tasks that these workers performed, both in the affective and empathetic relationship with the bereaved family members and in the strategies they devised to nonetheless offer symbolic homage to the corpses. Moreover, they distinguished themselves in implementing, at times of exceptional work and emotional stress, innovative and resilient solutions in grief rituals.

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## Notes

- 1 The research took place within the framework of the Franco-Swiss project ‘No lonely deaths’ (SNSF) and ‘Co-funeraire’ (ANR-CNRS) from 2020 to 2021, financed by the respective national research funds. Research coordinators: Gaëlle Clavandier (Université de Lyon) and Marc-Antoine Berthold (HETSL-Lausanne). The main objective of this research was to document the transformations related to funerary rituals and the treatment of corpses during the first and second waves



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  - 8 Clavandier et al., 'From One Body to Another'.
  - 9 P. Levi, *I sommersi e i salvati* (Torino, Einaudi, 1986).
  - 10 *Ibid.*, p. 9.
  - 11 The research considers, in total, more than fifty testimonies, 98% of which took place in person. Most of these encounters took place on an individual basis, with a conversation lasting between two and three hours. With the exception of one case, where a certain friendship was created that facilitated a succession of meetings, in all other cases the relationship between the researcher and the witness was limited to a single meeting. Out of respect for the right to privacy, the personal names of the persons will not be mentioned: for the sake of sheer ease of analysis, initials will be cited as a reference to each testimony, letters which, however, do not have any reference to the personal names of these persons.
  - 12 'The first Italian case of Covid-19 was reported in Lombardy on 20 February 2020. The entire pandemic period was characterised by local transmission, excluding the first 3 cases imported from China in late January 2020. To contain the epidemic, preventive public health measures of "social distancing" were taken, initially localised in a few restricted areas and gradually extended to the whole of Italy from 11 March 2020 (lockdown)' (G. C. Blangiardo, 'Una terza guerra mondiale?', *Istituto Nazionale di Statistica Report* (2021), 1–7).
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  - 14 [www.ilsole24ore.com/art/iss-istat-inizio-pandemia-eccesso-mortalita-178mila-casi-AEbOPLHB?refresh\\_ce=](http://www.ilsole24ore.com/art/iss-istat-inizio-pandemia-eccesso-mortalita-178mila-casi-AEbOPLHB?refresh_ce=) (accessed 28 January 2023).

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