



# svd brothers FORUM

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A life offered to THE WORD

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SVD BROTHERS FORUM is a digital forum written by its readers. On behalf of the Forum's Publisher, Fr. Rogelio Bag-a-o, SVD-PHS Provincial Superior, we asked the members of the Arnoldus Family to respond to the following questions.

1. How does your community accompany elderly or sick confreres before their encounter with death?
2. In your place, are wakes and/or "eulogies" conventional? If yes, what merits of dead confreres are usually commemorated?
3. What burial practices do you know, and how do you evaluate them?
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Greetings of peace and joy in the Lord!

I would like to begin by greeting our Argentinian Brother Raúl Acosta, SVD, who is the current Assistant Secretary of the Generalate for Brothers' Formation and Education. He has several years of experience in formation and administration. At the time of his appointment, he was the Zonal Coordinator of the Brothers in PANAM. His term began in February this year. We look forward to his active support and contribution to the SVD Brothers Forum.

By discovering and witnessing the unique burial rites and practices in several places of mission, we can therefore conjecture that indeed there are similarities and differences depending on the culture. In fact, the Society of the Divine Word experiences a variety in the different Provinces, Regions, and Missions (PRM).

Your written account and knowledge on our current topic enriches the understanding of SVD traditions in dealing with sick confreres and burial practices after death. We appreciate your time and effort in responding to our invitation to share your thoughts and experiences.

We are certain that this venue for sharing our life and traditions in the SVD could allow us to have a glimpse of our faith and traditions in our mission areas. Thank you for your generous contributions; your active participation helps us feel like a family in our worldwide missionary community.

As we celebrate the 150 years of SVD presence around the world, let us remember our fellow Divine Word Missionaries past and present. And to those who have gone ahead of us, may their souls rest in peace. Like St. Arnold Janssen, who sought only to do God's will, may we also be rewarded in God's heavenly abode.

I send my embrace, my prayer, and blessing to you all.



**Br. Darwin Loro | PHS**  
Brother Forum Supervisor

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# DEATH IN OUR COMMUNITIES

Br. Raul Acosta | Assistant for Brother Formation, SVD  
Generalate, ROM and ARE

In the final stage of our lives as religious, walking the path of illness and physical limitations can become increasingly difficult. Within our religious communities, we hold deep appreciation for our elder confreres who have devoted their lives to the mission. That is why, in our provinces and regions, we strive to create spaces and communities where they can live out the stage of old age and be cared for by individuals specially trained for that purpose.

This accompaniment is essential as we prepare for the culmination of our earthly journey. We are aware that there are differences between what we Christians believe and practice, and what society often promotes or lives. These initial reflections on how we approach death and the funeral rites we observe today highlight a key reality: death remains a taboo topic in many Western societies. Speaking of death is often avoided, and even the word itself is feared—laden with negative connotations.

Funeral rites vary across cultures; yet death is a cultural universal. All peoples and cultures perform rituals to honor the deceased.

The wake—known in many Latin American contexts as a *velatorio*—is a moment of communal accompaniment for the deceased confrere. Typically held in the main church before burial, it offers a sacred time for gathering, prayer, and farewell. This particular moment is filled with prayers and the recitation of the Rosary, especially to honor the memory of the missionary. It is a time when the religious community, along with the local parish community, comes together. Parishioners, relatives, friends, and the Holy Spirit Missionary Sisters (SSpS) are often present to share in this experience of mourning and support.





In Latin America, wakes are still commonly held in family homes and community spaces, often in churches—especially in rural areas. There, a funeral Mass is celebrated with the body present. However, in cities, it is more common for wakes to take place in funeral homes, where relatives and friends gather, and a minister is invited to offer prayers or a brief liturgical farewell.

Among the religious practices that support families through mourning, one meaningful tradition in many parts of Latin America is the *novenario*—nine consecutive days of prayer for the deceased. During this time, families invite friends and neighbors to gather and pray, most often the Rosary. Family altars are set up with a photograph or a meaningful object, alongside images of Christ or the Blessed Virgin Mary.

In religious communities, the soul of the deceased confrere is remembered in every Mass for a period of time—often a week or longer—as a way of processing the grief and recalling the missionary’s life. It is also customary to read the names of SVD confreres or SSPS and SSPSAP sisters who passed away on that day.

Rituals are vital for accompanying the grieving process. Each person will interpret and live these moments differently, aided by memory. Collective memory is an important element that keeps our predecessors present in a lasting way. That is why it is essential to commemorate and remember our pioneers and ancestors in the missionary life. This memory is nourished by intentionally recalling those who gave their lives for and through the mission.



During our provincial gatherings, retreats, or assemblies, we always dedicate a moment of prayer and reflection in the cemetery where the remains of our fellow priests and missionary brothers rest. We know they continue to inspire us through all the goodness they shared with us during their lives. The values they left behind endure and they are remembered for the moments, events, and missions they shared with their communities and fellow missionaries.



# VARIOUS PRACTICES

Br. Stephen Bonsu | GHA

Accompanying elderly or sick confreres before their encounter with death is a deeply compassionate and spiritual responsibility in my community. Here's how such accompaniment typically unfolds:

- **Spiritual Support** – Regular access to sacraments, prayers, blessings, and spiritual conversations prepare confreres for their journey.
- **Presence and Companionship** – Fellow members ensure the dying confrere is not alone, offering a sense of fraternal communion.
- **Pastoral Care** – Chaplains or spiritual directors provide guidance and reflection, helping confreres find peace in their final days.
- **Medical and Emotional Care** – Communities coordinate appropriate medical treatment, palliative care, and emotional support.
- **Community Rituals** – Special prayers, commendation rites, and gatherings offer spiritual solidarity.

- **Ongoing Remembrance** – Funeral rites and memorial prayers keep the confrere's memory alive within the community.

In our place, in many communities—particularly within Catholic and other Christian traditions—wakes and eulogies are conventional practices when a confrere (a fellow member of a religious order or clergy) passes away.

- **Wakes** may include the Office for the Dead, Rosary, or Vigil services.
- **Eulogies** are often given outside formal funeral liturgies, celebrating virtues such as fidelity to religious vows, service, personal humility, and leadership.

Burial practices vary widely across cultures and religions, reflecting deep beliefs about death, the afterlife, community, and respect for the deceased. Here are several major types, along with a general evaluation of each.





Image Credit: canva.com

- In-Ground Burial – Traditional among Christians, Jews, and Muslims, offering a permanent resting place but requiring space and resources.
- Cremation – Accepted in Hinduism and increasingly among Christians, reducing land use but requiring energy.
- Green Burial – Eco-friendly, supporting natural decomposition but less widely available.
- Sky Burial – A Tibetan Buddhist practice allowing nature to reclaim the body but limited in global acceptance.
- Mummification – Historically significant but rarely practiced today.
- Cryonics – Preserving the body for potential future revival, though scientifically uncertain and expensive.

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NB: Each burial tradition reflects values such as spirituality, environmental impact, or legacy preservation.

If our cemeteries look traditional or do they rather follow innovative ways, that depends on the region and cultural preferences, but cemeteries today range from very traditional to highly innovative. Here are some practices.

- Memorial forests, where ashes nourish trees.
- Digital memorials, linking tributes to online platforms.
- Vertical cemeteries, maximizing space in urban areas.
- Cremation gardens or columbarium's, offering artistic alternatives to conventional graves.

My community often keeps the memory of deceased member alive through various traditions, such as:

- Annual memorial services in their honour.
- Naming buildings, scholarships, or public spaces after them.
- Sharing oral histories and storytelling among confreres.
- Creating physical memorials, such as plaques or murals.
- Using online tributes and digital memorials.
- Continuing charitable work aligned with the confrere's mission.

# CASE STUDY: The Life and Care of Retirees at Villa Cristo Rey (SVD-PHC)

Br. Eugenio Orog | PHC

Retirement is the threshold to inescapable death thereby meeting our Creator and being asked: What have you done with your life; Did you live it in purpose; Now what is the meaning of it all then? No wonder we are inundated with memories, as if our life is awakened anew towards holiness and decline. Some of them are disturbing that they have to be realigned with the standards of Christ. Loneliness and boredom can be real too. Teilhard de Chardin commented “if there were no death, the earth would certainly seem stifling.” For him, death is “the only way out to a greater life.” Death does not return us to “the great current of things” but “surrender us totally to God.”

In this context, silence and solitude are necessary. Silence in order to become receptive of God’s mysterious ways. The more one face his thoughts in silence, the more grounded he becomes. And solitude for time and space—being alone figuring out whether one is in union with God—one’s ultimate destiny. It is a journey towards a deeper interiority. Consequently, a residential place is needed. At the SVD Philippines Central Province, we have Villa Cristo Rey (VCR). It is a home whereby utmost care and concern are promoted. Here there is plenty of time and space to introspect one’s life and pray. It is said: the bodily aging is fast but wisdom is slow. So community living is needed.

“None of us lives for oneself, and no one dies for oneself.” (Romans 14:7). For life is a process and there is always a greater good which we have to search.

By way of proceeding we are now “*non enimvero active imno potius passive*” (No longer that active but seemingly passive). One has to be compliant to doctors, nurses, caregivers, therapists, etc. When we were still active missionaries, we were engaged with various people but now this is taken away from us. But our missionary identity still remains. In this way, a total healing may happen because there is a mutual cooperation and we are not isolating ourselves from the people.



Image Credit: fb-Villa Cristo Rey



Image Credit: fb-Espartunez

Presently, the practice is: a sick confrere is sent to the hospital for treatment. Otherwise he stays at VCR and he is provided with what is available. When a confrere dies, the Provincialate informs his family and relatives through the last will and testament. Then his body is sent to mortuary for embalming. Wake follows usually in three to four days while waiting for the family and friends to pay a visit. In the daily community masses, during the wake, we sprinkle holy water symbolizing our solidarity that his soul may rest in peace. To die is returning home just like the prodigal son. Many times we had been told about this, but we seldom desire it especially when there is so much pain and suffering thereby bringing much hardships.

Anointing of the sick through Father Superior is also done as part of the protocol. During the death ritual, eulogies are given. From my experiences, I came to know and appreciate a confrere better than ever before. At the mass, Father Provincial and/or a relative may give a thanksgiving speech. This is uplifting.

After the mass, a funeral procession is held from the church to the cemetery. Our cemetery is for the Arnoldus family: SVD, Blue and Pink Sisters. The confrere and the crowd follow the car in prayer. Our cemetery is traditional, meaning the whole body is buried. Although, cremation is also being done, especially during the time of COVID. The ashes are placed in the urn and put into the smaller niches. So far, this practice is adequate and inspiring.

On one's death anniversary, names of the deceased members of the Arnoldus family are mentioned during the Eucharistic celebration. It can be a way of being in solidarity with them. And once a year, in November, the Arnoldus family gathers together at the Pink Sister's Chapel for a common mass. This is followed by a blessing of the tombstone and niches. Our coming together is followed by agape: socialization and storytelling. The Arnoldus family cares for each dearly departed from this Earth to eternity.

#### INTERVIEWED:

- Fr. Michael Padua, SVD, the most senior of all retirees, 95 years old.
- Fr. Ed Guarin, SVD, VCR Superior
- Mr. Revy Mojica – Head Nurse



Image Credit: fb-Villa Cristo Rey

# THEY WISH TO GO HOME...

Br. Dominikus Karvayu | ANG

Before sharing of my experience in ministering for sick confreres, I would first like to introduce myself. My name is Br. Dominikus Dominggu Karvayu, SVD. I am from Indonesia, precisely from East Nusa Tenggara, East Flores. I have been working in Angola since 2003 up to present.

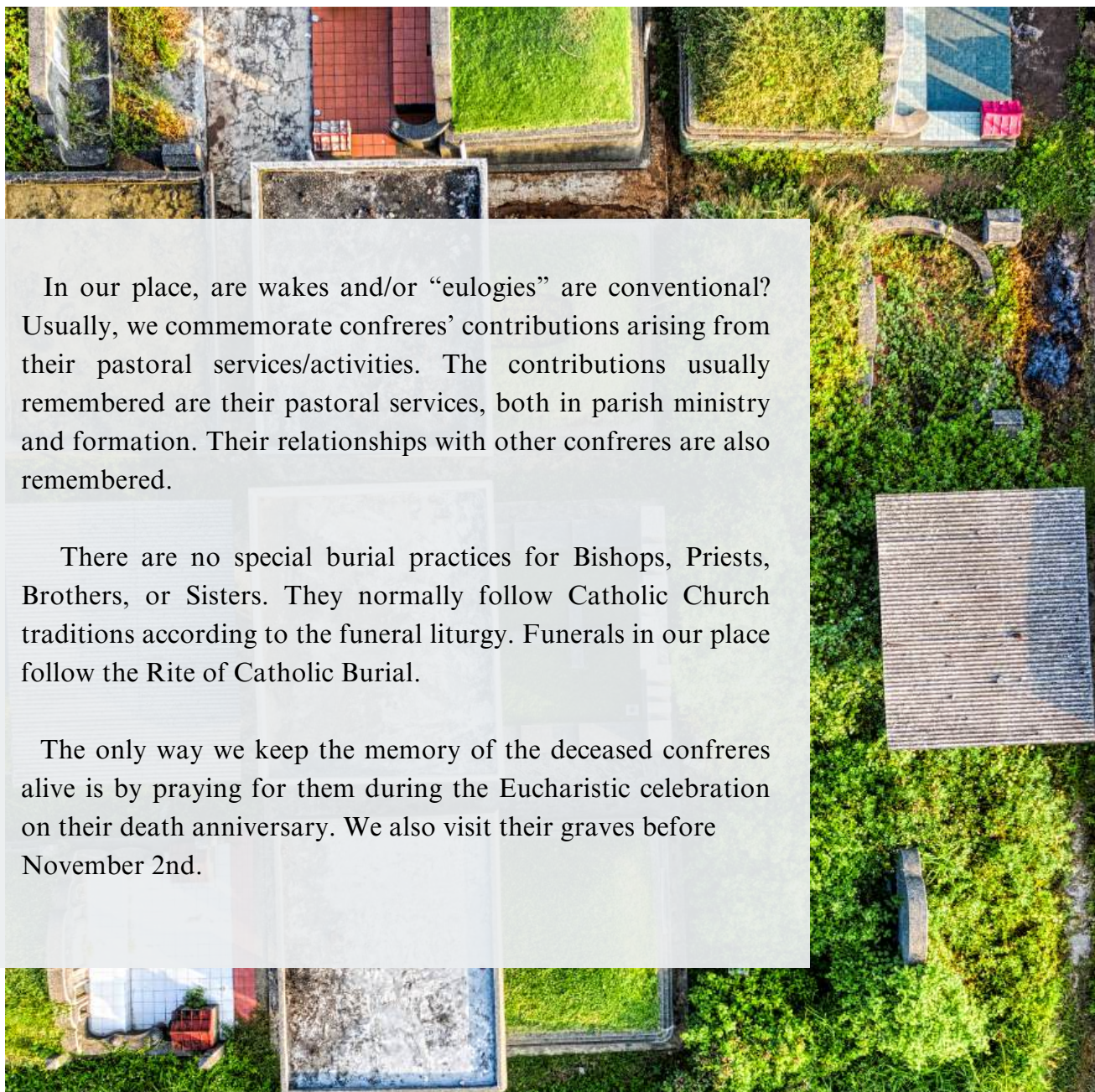
Generally, most of the confreres in our province who are elderly or sick request to return to their respective countries. Only a few of us choose to remain in the mission area. For those who choose to stay, we give them special attention. Everything depends on the initiative of each confrere. Their needs, both physical and spiritual, are fulfilled as much as possible. We try our best to provide the best care for them. However, everything depends on individual initiative, as sometimes our pastoral commitments make us forget them.

This negative situation is caused by several reasons.

- a. We don't have a retirement house for sick or the elderly.
- b. We don't have someone or a confrere specially to take care for the elderly and sick confreres.

Due to the lack of facilities (retirement house) or person in-charge, many elderly and sick confreres request to return to their home countries.





In our place, are wakes and/or “eulogies” are conventional? Usually, we commemorate confreres’ contributions arising from their pastoral services/activities. The contributions usually remembered are their pastoral services, both in parish ministry and formation. Their relationships with other confreres are also remembered.

There are no special burial practices for Bishops, Priests, Brothers, or Sisters. They normally follow Catholic Church traditions according to the funeral liturgy. Funerals in our place follow the Rite of Catholic Burial.

The only way we keep the memory of the deceased confreres alive is by praying for them during the Eucharistic celebration on their death anniversary. We also visit their graves before November 2nd.



Image Credit: canva.com



Image Credit: canva.com

# THROUGH OUR DAILY CONVERSATIONS – THEY ARE REMEMBERED

Br. Alfonso José Berger | BRN

In our province of Northern Brazil (BRN), elderly confreres (both brothers and priests) live in the province's retirement home, where they receive constant care from nurses and weekly visits from a doctor. This community is located in the city of Juiz de Fora (MG), about 300 kilometers from Belo Horizonte, the state capital. The community rector organizes the house's daily life: liturgical celebrations, meals, occasional outings, and formation meetings. When necessary, the rector or his delegate accompanies the confrere to medical appointments, tests, hospitalizations, and so on.

Wakes are held in the community chapel, with participation from community members, representatives from other SVD communities, and local laypeople from around Juiz de Fora. During the funeral Mass, the obituary is read, and some personal anecdotes about the deceased are shared. Typically, the person's qualities are highlighted, such as the ministries they carried out in various places within the province, along with the cause of death.

In terms of funeral practices, I am familiar only with the customary practices in our province: after the wake, the deceased confrere is buried in the city's cemetery, in a section reserved for SVD members who passed away before him.

Our cemeteries follow a traditional style, with the name of the deceased engraved on the tombstone. In cases where multiple confreres are buried in the same location (in separate coffins), their names are listed on a plaque at the entrance wall.

Our community keeps alive the memory of deceased members. This usually happens informally, through conversations about confreres who once served in the province—both their 'virtues' and 'shortcomings.' We do not have the custom of keeping written records of their personal stories. However, the provincial office maintains a registry that holds basic information about each confrere: date of arrival in the country, assignments, and positions held. The obituary is the final entry added to the record.



# NICHES INSTEAD OF TOMBS

Br. Karl Scharschmitt | KEN



Since the opening of a new mission in Kenya in the year 1984, three confreres and one lay missionary have died. One Irish and one Indian died suddenly of heart attack, in their sixties. When Fr. Theodor died, we had just purchased a new piece of land, which we thought could be the basis plot of the SVD in Kenya, Since it is the costume and tradition in Kenya, that the deceased member of a family are buried in their homestead, we went to the Chief and asked permission to bury our member in our SVD land and was granted. By digging a hole in the ground we found the place very rocky.

These gave me the idea, as they do in other places, to build a kind of a chapel with niches. Therefore all the others deceased were buried in niches.

I am reaching the retirement age. I was living in one of our parishes. But I would have to move whenever the parish is handed over to the diocese. The Kenya province did not yet have a retirement house.

I was given permission to build a retirement home on the new plot. Since then, I am residing there as a community member with 2 other confreres and still do my reduced mission work from there.

The elderly priest Fr. Tom who died at the age of 88 years, was staying at the regional house in Nairobi as a community member until he died. Since he was in Nairobi, medical assistance was near and on call if needed. When Fr. Tom got weak and needed help, the provincial hired a young man to assist him.

Here in our Kenya Province, all formalities are taken care by the province procurator. The dead Priest or Brother will be placed into one of our parish churches where he was working and is known, to give the people the chance to visit. A solemn funeral mass is celebrated, attended by all SVD members available.

Selected confreres and people are giving a testimony of his life and was he was known for, and thank him for all he has done for the good of the people. The burial takes place usually after 3 days.

Our dead are remembered on All Saints Day. We have a small prayer service in our seminary. Since the cemetery is at our own place, we can visit our dead any time.



# IN CONGO: BIOGRAPHY BOOKLET

Fr. Hugo Tewes | CON

How does your community accompany elderly or sick confreres before they encounter death? This question has rarely been asked in our Congo province, as we don't yet have a functioning nursing home or retirement home. The confreres who have died here in Congo all died after a very short illness or were found dead in their rooms.

A wake is held the night before the burial, during which confreres or lay people who knew the confrere honor his merits. Before the burial, at the beginning of the requiem, a short biography of the deceased is read.

In terms of burial practices, so far, we have always used burials in the ground. Our cemeteries are more traditional in design.

How does my community keep the memory of deceased members alive? A good 10 years ago, I began to record the lives and works of my confreres in writing. My Indian confrere, Valerian D'Souza, advised me to write a short biography of the deceased confreres, which could then be read out annually on the anniversary of their death, as it is the case in India.





In Germany, something similar existed, but in a more detailed form, which my professor of church history, Fr. Fleckner, published in several volumes under the title "So lebten sie" (So They Lived). These books could be found in libraries, where interested parties could read them. In 2015, I published the brochure "Ils ont semé le Verbe" (They Sowed the Word) with Brother Clemens Jansen, containing 62 short biographies. It was then sent to all confreres in perpetual vows and to all communities, with the request that they read the short biographies in community on the anniversary of their deaths, perhaps during midday prayer or after vespers. Some responded positively to this suggestion.

I cannot say how many communities actually read these biographies. I have since published a second edition with over 100 short biographies. In the parish where I work, we read excerpts from these biographies to the faithful after daily Mass. This was actually quite well received.

Since we usually do our retreats in Ngondi, where the cemetery is located (and these usually take place in November), we often meet at the cemetery for prayer or Mass and then remember, in particular, those who have found their final resting place there.

# LAST WORDS FROM THE EDITORS

Dear Confreres,

Peace!

Thank you for reading and contributing to this issue. The next issue will be published in September 2025. The guide questions will reach you on July 31, 2025.

For the meantime, you can write comments on the present issue and/or suggest topics for the coming issues. We will be very happy to publish your insights. Moreover, we would deeply appreciate it if you could also attach some photos of you as you send us your articles.

Please, do send your comments and suggestions to this email addresses: [blanyi@usc.edu.ph](mailto:blanyi@usc.edu.ph)

You can write in any of the following languages: English, Spanish, Bahasa Indonesia, German, and Polish.

In the Divine Word,  
Your SVD Brothers Forum Publisher and Editors



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