

Cemeteries in Spain during the covid-19 pandemic. Complementary notes on expert and lay knowledge

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Abstract. The impact of the coronavirus pandemic on funeral companies tested the response capacity of this industrial sector. The excess mortality required a high intensity response, whereby companies had to deal with a situation characterised by uncertainty and a certain lack of coordination with the health authorities. In this exceptional context, the cemetery regained its centrality within the funerary services system as the space designated by society for human remains. In contrast to funeral homes, which had to close during the pandemic, cemeteries could continue to provide their services albeit on a restricted basis. This text discusses the current role of cemeteries in the context of the pandemic and the changes in the way Spanish society deals with death. To this end, it analyses documents and reports produced by companies in this sector and contrasts them with the testimonies of citizens who have had no contact with the world of funeral services. Expert and lay knowledge is combined as a way to reflect upon the present and future of cemeteries.

Keywords: Spain, cemeteries, pandemics, funerary industry, expert and lay knowledge.

CEMENTERIOS EN ESPAÑA DURANTE LA PANDEMIA DE COVID-19. NOTAS COMPLEMENTARIAS SOBRE EL CONOCIMIENTO DE EXPERTOS Y LEGOS

Resumen: El impacto de la pandemia de coronavirus en las empresas funerarias puso a prueba la capacidad de respuesta de este sector industrial. La sobremortalidad provocó una respuesta de alta intensidad, en la que estas empresas tuvieron que hacer frente a una situación marcada por la incertidumbre y cierta descoordinación con las autoridades sanitarias. En este contexto excepcional, el cementerio, como espacio destinado por la sociedad a depositar los restos humanos, recuperó su centralidad dentro del sistema de servicios funerarios. A diferencia de las funerarias que tuvieron que cerrar durante la pandemia, los cementerios pudieron seguir prestando sus servicios de forma restringida. Este texto reflexiona sobre las funciones actuales de los cementerios en el contexto de la pandemia y los cambios en la forma en que la sociedad española se enfrenta a la muerte. Para ello, analiza documentos e informes elaborados por empresas del sector y los contrasta con los testimonios de ciudadanos sin contacto con el mundo de los servicios funerarios. Se propone la combinación de conocimientos expertos y profanos como forma de reflexionar sobre el presente y el futuro de los cementerios.

Palabras clave: España, cementerios, pandemias, industria funeraria, conocimiento experto y profano.

1. Introduction

The cemetery is perhaps one of the public spaces with the greatest symbolic confluence in our society, but which still retains its original purpose: to be the final destination of mortal remains and to house the memory of our deceased (Laqueur, 2015). The complementary relationship between this dual purpose as the space of the living and the dead allows us to give it meaning: it is the “place of the dead” (Baudry, 1999), the “space of death” (Ragon, 1981), the “park of the ancestors” (Urbain, 1978), or more poetically referred to as the “house of the dead” as expressed by Paul Valéry in his well-known poem *Le cimetière marin*. It is a space inhabited by the non-living, but it also offers a service to the living as another heterotopia, necessary for the functioning of our society according to Brossat (2011). Interest in rethinking the meaning and social uses of cemeteries seems to have revived in recent years (see the reflections in this regard by Julie Rugg, 2000 and 2022), which, according to Clavandier and Nérard (2019), palliates the relative lack of interest in cemetery spaces from the social sciences. The human sciences, on the other hand, have found in cemetery spaces a way to reconstruct our societies’ past, and this has coincided with the memorial phase in which we are living. As such, cemeteries reclaim their legacy in various cultural activities (Frihammar-Silverman, 2018).

Today, this dual role of managing remains and memories is transforming funerary practices (the rise of cremation in Western Europe as a whole, and the resulting uncertainty about the final destination of ashes, see Mathijssen, 2017), and the location and expression of remembrance and memory (the identification of other deathscapes defined by our society in which death, mourning and remembrance all have a role, see Maddrell-Sidaway, 2010). The meaning of the cemetery as created in the modern era is undergoing a reformulation, a process that is clearly understood very differently across Europe as a whole, due to the different funerary cultures that have been deployed and which have evolved logically over time (Trompette, 2008; Davies, 2015; Belmas-Nonnis Vigilante, 2017; Parsons, 2018; Rugg-Parsons, 2018; Mathijssen-Venhorst, 2019).

Analysing the impact of the coronavirus pandemic on cemeteries also provides a good opportunity to understand how their classic services to society are being modified. This text examines cemeteries in Spain, in the context of the excess mortality caused by Covid-19, by observing the transformations they are undergoing. Due to the cultural changes that influence the celebration of death, mourning and the remembrance of the deceased, the unceasing urban pressure of the city to continue growing, and the increase in cremation (the practice whereby the ashes of the deceased are given to relatives, and which thus

replaces cemeteries in the custody of human remains), the cemetery has become a silent witness to these transformations. Firstly, I will give a brief description of the funeral sector in Spain, and then I will go on to analyse the impact of the pandemic upon it. Secondly, I will present the results of a qualitative proposal for a debate on the present and future of cemeteries as an institution at the service of society, commissioned by the Association of Funeral Companies and Municipal Cemeteries [Asociación de Funerarias y Cementerios Municipales] (AFCM),¹ in which managers of public funeral companies, professionals who have collaborated with these companies and citizens completely unrelated to the funeral sector were interviewed.

In line with other similar studies that have sought to gather the opinions of citizens regarding funeral services during the pandemic (Rawlings-Lewis-Tieman, 2022), and using this lay knowledge² rather than data provided by the funeral sector itself (Clavandier-Nérard, 2019), this study adopts a qualitative research process based on a series of interviews and focus groups.³ The aim was twofold: on the one hand, to assess the impact of the pandemic from the perspective of this expert knowledge, and on the other hand, to find out the opinions of citizens from outside the funeral sector regarding the role of cemeteries.

The research strategy was to contrast both expert and lay knowledge in order to discuss funeral management and the role of cemeteries, and to understand the distance between the two perspectives. The new orientation of funeral services towards caring for people also suggests a change of perspective in relation to the cemetery and its purpose as a space of remembrance, and it does not always match lay knowledge, which is based on the experiences of loss and expresses a certain suspicion of the commercialisation of funeral care.

From these different points of view, I outline some initial notes to reflect on the present (and future) of cemeteries in Spanish society.

1 See <<https://cementeriosvivos.es/>>. AFCM's commission to reflect on the future of cemeteries in the context of the pandemic resulted in the report "Proposals for the Cemeteries of the Future", finalised in September 2021.

2 The concept of profane knowledge is particularly prevalent in the field of the sociology of medicine and health (see Williams, 2013). In this text, we recover the idea of knowledge based on experience and the reproduction of social representations about death and funeral services from this concept.

3 Between February and June 2021, four managers of municipal cemeteries, ten experts working in the funeral sector and three focus groups with nineteen people aged between 35 and 65 were interviewed. The people in the focus groups were from different professions, had different levels of higher education, lived in Spain, and had no specific knowledge of the funeral sector. In terms of gender, a total of twenty-two women and eleven men were interviewed. All these interviews were conducted online, recorded, and transcribed, and the anonymity of the people who participated in the focus groups was maintained. In the text, managers (G), experts (E) and citizens (C) are identified, along with the focus group and the date of the interview.

2. An overview of cemeteries in Spain

As in other European societies, in Spain cemeteries are thought of in terms of a duality with respect to the living: the city versus the cemetery, the place where our dead rest, but always at a safe distance and on the periphery of where the living reside. The detachment of these sepulchral spaces from Catholic parishes from the 18th century onwards, particularly in the 19th century, was not without controversy or resistance. The fact that the new custodian of human remains became a civil facility, no longer close to churches and parishes, was one of the most significant changes in the care of the deceased in Spanish society. This change of mentality was justified by social, hygienic rationalism, but was not exempt from a long and intense controversy about the secularisation of cemeteries that lasted until well into Franco's era.⁴

The creation of these civil cemeteries also meant opening up to a new way of relating to death and the deceased. In this respect, Jean-Didier Urbain (1989) argued that the cemetery was no longer a place of transition to eternal life (according to the dictates of Christian doctrine) but instead had become secularised and a place that conserved and accumulated the dead. It was therefore necessary for the deceased to be subjected to a triple confinement by the coffin, the grave and the cemetery as a differentiated space. The walls of the cemetery not only protect the dead, but also distance them from the living, following a practice that is very common in Spanish society and which contrasts with the cemetery-garden model that is more typical of northern European, Protestant societies.

However, this very spatial relationship between city and cemetery has been changing, as the city has grown to occupy the space that separated it from sites that, in the past, had been granted to the dead. In some conurbations, cemeteries have been swallowed up by the city, so that the proximity between the living and the dead has become more apparent. Despite this, physical proximity has not always transformed into social proximity. In this respect, the most obvious indicator of this distance is the decreasing number of visits to the dead. Decades ago, visiting the cemetery was a common practice (much more so in rural than urban contexts), but is now limited to specific times of the year such as the All Saints' Day. When visiting is reduced to a minimum, graves and tombs are practically no longer cared for. Cemeteries languish, and remembering the deceased no longer necessarily means going to their graves.

⁴ For the evolution of this process in Spain from the 18th to the mid-20th century, see Jiménez Lozano (1978). The emergence of civil cemeteries was not at all welcome, because they were regarded as a "sort of cursed or forgotten corral to which looks of terror or pity or just indifference is directed, while the general Catholic cemetery is part of the community of the living and is felt as a sacred place" (p.15).

As Isabelle Dubois (2009) suggests, in cemeteries, remembrance is beginning to replace granite, a very clear simile of the significant changes that are being experienced in relation to death in our society. It is not only the increase in cremations in Spain (which in 2021 already accounted for 45% of all funeral ceremonies⁵) that calls into question the model of administrative concessions of tombs, graves, and niches in the cemetery, but also that now greater importance is given to the process of dying than to death itself. Thus, a whole series of treatments are deployed with respect to the dying (in the form of palliative care), the management of the physical body is delegated to specialised companies, and mourning is understood as an emotional alteration that requires therapeutic treatment. As a result of this sequence of actions, the cemetery, which previously occupied a central place in funeral management, has lost its prominence as the main space for funerals in Spanish society and has been replaced by the funeral home (*tanatorios*). Cremations have now relegated it to the last place where the deceased are laid to rest.

The functional distinction between funeral services and cemeteries, defined in this business area after the liberalisation of funeral services started in Spain in 1996, entails the incorporation of a new space, the funeral home, which centralises all acts concerning the deceased and their relatives, from the wake to the funeral, and including the therapeutic management of bereavement. Today in Spain there are a total of 17,682 cemeteries, 2,525 funeral homes and 537 crematoria. In addition, 1,076 funeral service companies, both private and public, are registered under a free competition system. These private companies promote the creation of funeral homes as a way of competing with cemeteries to occupy the central role in caring for the deceased and their families, and thus completing the totality of funeral services on the basis of the municipal concessions which they obtain.⁶ Spanish cemeteries continue to be publicly owned (there are very few private cemeteries), despite the fact that a very significant number of municipalities have delegated their management to private companies. As a whole, the funeral sector in Spain is an expanding market (which in 2021 had a turnover of 1,630 million euros). Recently, the trend is clearly towards concentration and there are four

5 See the report by Panasef, *Radiografía del sector funerario 2022* (<<https://www.panasef.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Panasef-Radiografía-Sector-2022.pdf>>) (accessed 23 October 2022).

6 The model of funeral homes in Spain is radically different from other international funeral realities. According to the report Funos, *Informe tendencias del sector funerario, 2021* (<<https://funos.es/informes-y-estudios/situacion-del-sector-funerario-en-espana-2021>>, accessed on 23 October 2022), "the Spanish model of funeral homes, with modern facilities that provide multiple services, is probably one of the most advanced in the world. While in Spain it has become habitual to hold the wake in a mortuary, in the rest of the countries around us and in developed countries the wake is still held in private homes, in churches or in small local funeral parlours, which have nothing to do with our modern funeral homes".

large companies⁷ that constantly introduce innovations, account for 45% of the funeral insurance of the Spanish population (something that is quite unique) and dealt with 61% of the burials in Spain in 2018 (according to data from the Spanish Union of Insurance and Reinsurance Companies).

3. The impact of the pandemic on the Spanish funeral sector

According to the Mortality Monitoring System (MOMO⁸) report of 3 January 2023, it is estimated that since 1 January 2020 there has been an excess mortality of 147,444 deaths in Spain. According to data from the National Institute of Statistics⁹, between 2019 and 2020 there was an increase of 17.9% in the number of deaths, which in 2021 declined by 8.73% compared to the previous year, but without yet reaching pre-pandemic levels. The aforementioned Panasef report for 2022 shows the increase in turnover in this sector, which in 2020 increased its profits by 8.6% compared to the previous year, but decreased by 4.12% between 2020 and 2021. Likewise, this report referred to the capacity of the funeral sector in 2020 and 2021, stating that, with regard to both mortuaries and crematoriums, “the demand that took place in these years far exceeded that of previous years”.

All these data deserve to be contextualised within this exceptional social situation. The funeral sector had its normal processes disrupted when the Spanish government imposed a state of alarm on 14 March 2020 (RD 463/2020¹⁰), which established a series of health and social confinement measures involving, among other things, the suspension of wakes and funeral ceremonies. Some municipalities, concerned that funerals could contribute to the spread of the virus, went so far as to prohibit the presence of family members at the burial of their deceased. The Ministry of Health had to correct this fear by means of Order SND/298/2020 of 29 March,¹¹ which clarified this issue by prohibiting

7 These companies have been consolidating their position in the market by absorbing other smaller companies. By turnover, these are Mémora (€165m, 2019), Albia (€91m, 2020), Servisa (€66m, 2020) and Funespaña (€48m, 2020). The latter three are owned by Spain's leading insurance companies (respectively Santalucía, Ocaso and Mapfre). Source: Funos, *Informe tendencias del sector funerario*, 2021 (<<https://funos.es/informes-y-estudios/situacion-del-sector-funerario-en-espana-2021>> (accessed 23 October 2022)).

8 See <https://www.isciii.es/QueHacemos/Servicios/VigilanciaSaludPublicaRENAVE/EnfermedadesTransmisibles/Paginas/Informes_MoMo_2022.aspx> (accessed 28 January 2023).

9 <https://www.ine.es/prensa/edcm_2021.pdf> (accessed 28 January 2023).

10 See <<https://www.boe.es/eli/es/rd/2020/03/14/463>>

11 See <<https://www.boe.es/eli/es/o/2020/03/29/snd298>>

wake services, postponing funeral ceremonies and limiting participation in the funeral ritual of the deceased to three people.¹²

However, the sixth paragraph of this same order established that “the prices of funeral services may not be higher than the prices in force prior to 14 March 2020”. The Minister for Consumer Affairs himself denounced the fact that some funeral parlours increased the price of their services by “up to 2,000 euros”.¹³ It was not surprising that in the context of the pandemic, the debate about the cost of funeral services arose again. Many media outlets criticised funeral companies, not only because of the suspicion that they were increasing the cost of their services during the pandemic, but also because of their high prices in previous periods.¹⁴ In October 2021, the Organisation of Consumers and Users (OCU) published a comparative report on the price of funeral services in different Spanish cities, in which it insisted on the lack of transparency by funeral homes, which do not always break down the price of their services.¹⁵

Alfredo Gosálvez, general secretary of the employers’ association of Spanish funeral companies, Panasef, responded to these arguments as spokesperson for the funeral sector, insisting that the prices of services “have remained the same before and during this pandemic. They have not been touched at all” and complained that “misinterpretations of some funeral service invoices were doing a lot of damage to the sector”.¹⁶ The newspaper *El Economista*, which reported on the losses of the funeral companies during the first months of the pandemic,¹⁷ included statements by Gosálvez in this regard, in which he

12 From May onwards, these restrictions were relaxed (Order SND/399/2020 of 9 May, <<https://www.boe.es/eli/es/o/2020/05/09/snd399>>) allowing the presence of up to fifteen people at funeral ceremonies, and on 9 June Royal Decree-Law 21/2020 (<<https://www.boe.es/eli/es/rdl/2020/06/09/21/con>>), which defined the so-called “new normal”, did not limit capacity, as long as the interpersonal distance of 1.5 metres was maintained, and crowds were avoided.

13 <<https://www.abc.es/espana/abci-garzon-denuncia-algunas-funerarias-aprovechan-pandemia-202004011627-video.html>> (accessed 21 June 2020).

14 “El precio abusivo de las funerarias con los muertos del Covid-19: hasta 4.000 euros más por entierro” (*El Español*, 27 March 2020) <https://www.elespanol.com/espana/20200327/precio-abusivo-funerarias-muertos-covid-19-euros-entierro/477703849_0.html>; “Conceptos inventados y precios inflados: las funerarias, un negocio en pocas manos que especula con la COVID-19” (*Eldiario.es*, 29 March 2020) <https://www.eldiario.es/economia/conceptos-inventados-inflados-funerarias-covid-19_1_1225570.html>; “¿Cuánto cuesta morir? De las flores al tanatorio o al féretro: así es la desigual factura entre comunidades” (RTVE, 1 November 2022) <<https://www.rtve.es/noticias/20221101/cuanto-cuesta-morirse/2407130.shtml>> (accessed 18 May 2022).

15 <<https://www.ocu.org/organizacion/prensa/notas-de-prensa/2021/funerarias261021>> (accessed 18 May 2022).

16 *Niusdiario*, 30 March 2020, <https://www.niusdiario.es/sociedad/sanidad/sanidad-interviene-precio-funerarias-pagado-5000-euros-solo-visto-urna_18_2922945038.html> (accessed 18 May 2022).

17 “Las pérdidas de las empresas funerarias rondan el 50% desde la pandemia” (*El Economista*, 12 September 2020) <<https://www.eleconomista.es/empresas-finanzas/noticias/10765362/09/20/Las-perdidas-de-las-empresas-funerarias-rondan-el-50-desde-la-pandemia.html>> (accessed 18 May 2022).

acknowledged that they had to rent refrigerated trucks to store the bodies until they were buried, and that the closure of the morgues (where the private funeral companies did practically all their business) had caused losses of 50%. In a very revealing disclosure during the same interview, the head of the funeral employers' association stated that during the pandemic "we were mere transporters of the dead, something we don't like at all". However, the truth is that one of the most striking images of the whole pandemic in Spain, which showed the extent of the strain on the capacity of the funeral companies, was the one picturing the Palacio de Hielo (an ice rink) in Madrid converted into a temporary morgue.¹⁸ Another financial newspaper, *Cinco Días*, also analysed the impact of Covid-19 on funeral companies, showing the reality of small funeral companies that were much less able to cope with the crisis than the large conglomerates.¹⁹

Beyond this purely business dimension, the celebration of burials or cremations without funerals had an obvious emotional effect on those who lost a loved one during the first months of the pandemic. The loneliness of the dying was compounded by the anguish and grief of their relatives, who were unable to say goodbye to them with a funeral ceremony.²⁰ The usual mortuary services were limited to administrative functions, and the transfer of the deceased between localities was restricted for fear of the virus spreading. The unexpected consequence of all this was to put cemeteries back at the centre of funeral management. As they were in the open air, their activity was not as limited as it was for funeral homes, and although burials were not allowed with more than three attendees, they still continued to be carried out. Only during the All Saints' Day celebrations in 2020 and 2021, did capacity have to be controlled to prevent crowds in the funeral enclosures.

Once the pandemic was over, and normality was restored to funeral management, cemeteries and mortuaries resumed their usual functions, and the protective measures that had been put in place during that period were gradually abandoned. However, the cemeteries had to deal with the consequence of a decision taken in the first months of the pandemic regarding the deceased who were infected with Covid-19. These bodies had to be buried in niches and

18 "Madrid utiliza ya como morgue las instalaciones del Palacio de Hielo" (*El País*, 23 March 2020) <<https://elpais.com/espana/madrid/2020-03-23/madrid-utilizara-como-morgue-las-instalaciones-del-palacio-de-hielo.html>>; "El Palacio de Hielo: la gran morgue de España, la imagen de la pandemia" (*El Mundo*, 8 April 2020) <<https://www.elmundo.es/espana/2020/04/07/5e8cb73521efa0b1668b46a3.html>> (accessed 18 May 2022).

19 "El Covid también golpea en la última línea: las funerarias" (*Cinco Días*, 19 November 2020) <https://cincodias.elpais.com/cincodias/2020/11/17/companias/1605609577_093627.html>. Of the thousand funeral companies in Spain, almost nine hundred are small family businesses, with fewer than ten employees and an average annual turnover of €300,000 (source: Funos, *Informe tendencias del sector funerario*, 2021).

20 See the text by Mercadal, Ferrer, Fradejas and Sánchez in this issue.

graves for a period of two years, after which time they had to be transferred to the ossuary, as indicated in the funeral service regulations. However, the problem is that these bodies were buried with a double shroud in order to protect the funeral workers, and this has inhibited the normal bodily decomposition process, meaning that we do not know if coronavirus is still latent in these human remains.

4. The impact of the pandemic as interpreted by the funeral industry

The circumstances experienced by the funeral sector during the pandemic were reported by the two main funeral publications in Spain: *Revista Funeraria* and *Revista Adiós Cultural*,²¹ the former independent and the latter published by Funespaña. These journals are primarily business-oriented and announce new developments in the sector. During the pandemic, both publications served as a mouthpiece for the Spanish funeral industry in this situation of exceptional mortality.²² The contents were oriented in two main blocks: one informed readers about the various initiatives in the sector to deal with the pandemic and maintain its services; the other appealed to a sort of *esprit de corps*, and defended its role in this emergency situation, while at the same time complaining about the lack of recognition from society.

The first measures taken by funeral companies were to develop protocols for dealing with Covid-19 affected corpses. The Ministry of Health drew up a technical document for the treatment and transfer of corpses with coronavirus, which served as the basis for an order to speed up the burial or cremation of those who had died with coronavirus.²³ This document – which followed the guidelines formulated by the World Health Organisation and the European Union – stipulated that all persons in charge of handling these corpses “must be provided with personal protective equipment (PPE)”. One of the main complaints of the funeral companies was that they were unable to provide this type of protection to their workers. They also lamented the lack of coordination with the health authorities²⁴ because morticians were considered essential

21 See <<https://revistafuneraria.com/>> and <<https://www.revistaadios.es/la-revista.html>>.

22 We analysed the issues of these magazines that appeared during 2020 and early 2021, in which there are numerous references to the pandemic. Issues 154 to 158 are *Revista Funeraria*, and issues 142 to 148 are *Revista Adiós Cultural*.

23 Order SND/272/2020 of 21 March 2020 (<<https://www.boe.es/eli/es/o/2020/03/21/snd272>>), and technical document “Procedure for the handling of corpses with COVID-19”. (<https://www.sanidad.gob.es/profesionales/saludPublica/ccayes/alertasActual/nCov/documentos/Manejo_cadaveres_COVID-19.pdf>) (accessed 18 May 2022).

24 The head of the Panasef employers’ association, in an interview for *Revista Funeraria* (issue 154, April-May 2020) stated that “the public administrations have not contacted us to programme or coordinate an action

workers during the state of alarm, but they did not receive the same recognition as other professionals.²⁵ Despite being the last link in the health chain during the pandemic, the funeral sector felt invisible, and the consequences on the mental health of its workers were not taken into account.²⁶

Of the various actions undertaken by the funeral sector during this period, of particular note is the development of good practice documents, in the form of bereavement guides for relatives and professionals. It is interesting to note that this type of action is in line with the progressive tendency of the sector to focus on the overall package of funeral services, which is where private companies focus their attention, leaving aspects related to the final destination of corpses in second place. The sector's journals also report an increase in cremations during this period: according to data provided by two private funeral companies operating in Catalonia, cremations increased by 37% in 2020 compared to the previous year. Together the two companies provided 61% of all services carried out (see *Revista Funeraria*, issue 157, October-November 2020).

Logically, however, the interest these companies have in customer satisfaction has led them to offer services that made sense in times of pandemic but have also been incorporated into their current portfolio. Some such services are the live streaming of ceremonies – necessary because of the difficulties people had in travelling and the limits placed on attendance – the home delivery of ashes to relatives during the period when funeral ceremonies were restricted, or online funeral services, which increased significantly.²⁷

A further element was also the social tribute paid to the victims of the pandemic. For example, the sector's magazines reported on initiatives that were carried out in cemeteries, either in the form of creating a commemorative feature (the figure *El abrazo*, "The embrace", which was promoted by Funespaña and located in the three Madrid cemeteries managed by this company, is a memorable example), or through acts of homage (which took place once the capacity limitations on attendance at open-air events were removed. See *Revista Adiós Cultural*, issue 147, March-April 2021).

plan which, if it had materialised, would have allowed us to manage the situation more simply and effectively, considerably reducing the collapse".

25 Such recognition did take place during the official tribute to the victims of coronavirus at the Royal Palace on 16 July 2020, in the presence of the Panasef Secretary General.

26 "Desgaste, estrés y miedo al contagio: las consecuencias del coronavirus en los funerarios", (*Innova Funeraria*, 11 February 2021) <<https://innovafuneraria.es/desgaste-estres-miedo-consecuencias-del-coronavirus-funerarios/>>. Of the various documents that were published during this period, the "Basic manual for cemetery staff in Zaragoza in times of the pandemic" is worthy of particular mention (<<https://www.zaragoza.es/cont/paginas/cementerios/pdf/manual-epidemia-cementerio-torrero.pdf>>), and was published by Zaragoza City Council in May 2020.

27 Apart from providing technological solutions for dealing with the covid-19 health emergency, both actions aimed to open up new market niches, in particular the contracting of funeral services during life in advance.

5. Time to talk about cemeteries

The expertise which the funeral industry holds is recognised by the public, but it is associated with the social taboo surrounding death. Funeral professionals lament - not only during the pandemic - the lack of understanding they receive from society regarding the important function they perform, which could be explained by our social avoidance of death. We do not even mention death for fear of invoking it. The daily coexistence with death that the funeral profession undergoes does not correspond to the cessation of life, which is experienced as a tragic exceptionality. We refer to it and its circumstances through intimate experiences with a greater or lesser impact on our emotions, but not as a result of intellectual reflection.

However, during the pandemic, when death became much more present in everyday life and social concern about dying was generated, the opportunity arose to share a reflection between experts and lay people about death and cemeteries. The following sections summarise the views put forward from three different perspectives: cemetery managers, professionals who collaborate with funeral service companies, and citizens with no connection to the funeral field.

5.1 Managing in the worst of times

A substantial part of the expert knowledge that funeral service managers have is not only to do with the application of clearly-outlined procedures, but also with experience (Rugg-Jones, 2019). Due to the gravity of the moment, the best management in the care of the deceased and their relatives is that which goes practically unnoticed, and in which all the procedures are done in the most appropriate and fluid way possible, without surprises or shocks. Furthermore, it must be done in a personalised and unique way. This is the experience that people who are saying goodbye to their loved ones want, which is why funeral companies carry out user satisfaction surveys. In the words of one of the managers interviewed, “people really appreciate personal attention, making everything easier for them, which in the end is what we do, isn't it? And our challenge is not to fall into the routine of what for us is our daily work; not to lose sight of the fact that for that person it is a unique and incomparable loss” (G1, 22-2-2021).

However, a situation of exceptional excess mortality, such as that resulting from the coronavirus pandemic, which was out of the norm and beyond measure, could never be contemplated in terms of this type of management. This point was a constant theme in all the interviews and served as a contrast to the usual management of a cemetery. Firstly, it is important to point out that the four

interviewees were managers of public cemeteries and funeral services, and this constitutes a very significant bias: in Spain only between 3% and 5% of funeral service companies are public²⁸, but the vast majority of cemeteries are still public. The reason for highlighting these interviewee profiles was to emphasise the public service dimension offered by cemeteries, and to highlight the fact that, during the height of the pandemic, cemeteries regained the centrality in the funeral process that had been usurped by (mostly privately-owned) funeral homes.

Public ownership is a subject under dispute in the funeral sector. The progressive incorporation of private capital in the funeral sector, added to that peculiarity of Spanish society whereby a high percentage of families have taken out funeral insurance, ends up generating the widely accepted idea that the whole sector is geared solely towards obtaining profits. The confusion caused by failing to distinguish between the insurance company, the funeral homes and the cemeteries, in order to be able to differentiate between those services which are governed by market competition or by prices set by municipal agreements, has a negative effect on the enhancement of the value of the cemetery and its services. Part of this confusion is sometimes shared by the political decision-makers who are responsible for funeral services. This can lead to private interests entering into the municipal management of these services, or to a lack of knowledge of their structure and a demand for a reduction in the fees imposed on citizens to cover the services offered (and which are the result of a specific political decision). The truth is that the relationship between managers and politicians could be described as singular, characterised by agreements and disagreements, which affect the functioning of these spaces.

For a short time during the pandemic, public funeral services were valued by policy makers as “the last link in the health chain” (G2, 23-2-2021) and essential for society. Beyond these exceptional moments, however, the interviewees expressed the difficulty of convincing politicians that the task of cemeteries in caring for and remembering the deceased has a value that cannot always be expressed in monetary terms. What is proposed by the cemeteries “are long-term investments. And this is an important factor when talking about the public sector. That, obviously, politicians must assume all this [...], as a benefit for society” (G3, 24-2-2021). In the opinion of those interviewed, the question of death and cemeteries is an unappetising topic for politicians in this regard, who only expect the managers to offer a succinct annual economic and operational balance sheet, and show little interest in complementary initiatives, or in changes and innovations in the services suggested. Their interest is expressed

²⁸ Personal communication from Miquel Trepà, General Manager of Cementiris de Barcelona, S.A. (21 February 2023).

on rare occasions, either coinciding with All Saints' Day (which was especially affected during the years of the pandemic, when the spaces had to be fitted out in accordance with health measures), or with the promotion of certain actions in the cemeteries aimed at remembrance, as in the case of the inauguration of spaces dedicated to perinatal death.

Another sign of this relative lack of interest on behalf of political leaders has been the creation of spaces to commemorate the victims of coronavirus, which have preferably been located in public places lacking any symbolic meaning (such as roundabouts at the entrance or exit of some towns), creating an allegorical element that will be difficult to decipher in years to come, and with a high degree of programmed obsolescence, which will make it lose the value of remembrance for which it was intended.

Secondly, and in order to contextualise the management of cemetery spaces, it is necessary to understand the specific physicality that is attributed to these enclosures as a "plot of land, generally enclosed, destined for the burial of corpses"²⁹. The cemetery is a captive space, the result of the process of segregation with respect to the populations it serves, which is why it is not thought of as a provisional site that can change in the immediate future, nor should it be "opened" to the public. It is therefore expected that its management will be oriented towards two very specific areas: spaces and practices. On the one hand, the organisation and maintenance of the interior space available, and on the other, the inclusion of new funerary practices. Its spatial extension, proposed as a response to the need to offer new facilities or services - mortuary or crematorium - is not always viable, either because the urban fabric has practically engulfed the cemetery, or because this potential space is under consideration for other non-funeral uses.

Thus, adapting these spaces to new funerary practices, whether due to the increase in cremation, the celebration of non-religious funerals (or of other religious traditions beyond Catholicism), or the reservation of spaces for specific funerary practices (as in the case of the Muslim and Hebrew communities), is combined with the maintenance of a place that structurally still revolves around very diverse burial units (pantheons, tombs or niches) which maintain different administrative regimes, whether this be ownership or temporary concession. The increase in cremations influences the concessions for the use of graves and niches, which affects the financial management of cemeteries. There is a loss of the social sense of having a concession in the cemetery, arguing that it will not be necessary in the case of future cremations. All this takes place in a sector where decisions are predominantly taken by private funeral service companies and where the last link in the chain - the cemeteries - end up on the receiving end of these social changes.

29 Diccionario de la Real Academia Española (<<https://dle.rae.es/>>) (accessed 13 November 2021).

Thirdly, the interesting commitment made by cemetery managers to enhance the value of their artistic and architectural heritage, and to carry out cultural activities related to death, can be considered as “complementary” to the main funerary function. However, it is also a valuable way to contribute to transforming social mentality regarding death³⁰. The basic idea is to be able to offer something more than a funeral service, to be able to attend to everything that surrounds the process of death, mourning and remembrance in a global way, so the objective is not so much to attract visitors to the cemetery as would be typical of a tourist or cultural approach (these activities tend to attract a very specific public), but to help society lose its taboo regarding death. The need to develop an education in values, in which the new generations understand the meaning of life, which also includes death, and also to understand that remembering the deceased is a way of being aware of one’s own origins, is strongly emphasised in the interviews: “when you have to explain the value of life, it might be easier to explain all that if you tell the story of your grandfather and celebrate his life here, in the cemetery” (G4, 25-2-2021). As we can see, the pandemic put the brakes on the development of these initiatives, something the interviewees regret, as it had been so difficult to convince political decision-makers of their appropriateness in the first place.

In summary, the collected testimonies, beyond indicating the circumstances of the management of cemetery spaces, reveal an important change of references in the field of funerary action, moving from the management of bodies to the care of people and attention to their emotions and feelings. In this sense, one of the interviewees explicitly stated: “we are managers of feelings” (G4, 25-2-2021). From funeral services that care for the body of the deceased until it is taken to its final destination, we have moved on to caring for relatives and loved ones regarding their emotional well-being and offer ways to keep the memory and remembrance alive. Cemetery managers are committed to claiming them as spaces of remembrance, but the question to be resolved in the future is whether cemeteries, in addition to being custodians of bodies, can also continue to claim to be custodians of memories.

30 In the Guide for Devising Cemetery and Crematorium Regulations or Ordinances published by the Spanish Federation of Municipalities and Provinces and the Association of Funeral Homes and Municipal Cemeteries in 2022 (<<https://acortar.link/MZuPGo>>) (accessed on 15 December 2022), it is included as one of the functions of public funeral services to “contribute to changing society’s mentality regarding the treatment of death, through landscape-urban, urban, social and cultural actions”.

5.2 Other complementary knowledge

The expert knowledge accumulated through experience in funeral management is complemented by the contributions of other professionals, who are required by public managers to support some of their actions in cemeteries. The commitment to innovation and the development of new funeral services facilitates the incorporation of other approaches and knowledge complementary to funeral management itself. These contributions are mainly focused on two main areas: the comprehensive care of the deceased, their relatives and loved ones, and the recovery and enhancement of the material funerary heritage of Spanish cemeteries. By going beyond the strict dimension of funeral management, the contributions of these professionals incorporate the desire to approach the social process of death in a different way.

The trend in the funeral industry towards comprehensive care for all situations that revolve around death is defined in terms of caring for people, whether this be the deceased, their loved ones or their relatives. A simple review of the corporate advertising of funeral companies is enough to appreciate this central focus. The three main functions of cemeteries and funeral services (the health management of corpses, the care of the deceased and their families, and the preservation of collective memory) define the framework of this comprehensive care. However, by incorporating other professionals not directly involved in funeral expertise, other perspectives are opened up for dealing with everything related to death and dying.

Accompanying bereavement is a premise to our way of dealing with death. This is articulated through funerals as a ritual ceremony of farewell and consolation with respect to the emotional impact of the loss for family and friends. With the progressive abandonment of the practice of mourning (much more so in urban than in rural areas), the emotion of losing a loved one comes to be considered as an alteration of our emotional well-being, which needs to be addressed from a therapeutic perspective. Grief counselling is equated with a therapeutic and restorative exercise.

Beyond this transformation, however - of how the loss of a loved one is felt - there is a consensus that the intensity of mourning depends on the way in which the death has materialised. During the pandemic, there was talk of incomplete, unfinished, or deferred mourning, as it was understood that not only were the circumstances of the death tragic, but also that the usual farewell ceremonies could not be performed. Without these rituals, it was not possible to say goodbye to the deceased, nor was it possible to help relatives and friends to close the mourning process (or mitigate its emotional effect), and to find the necessary

social comfort at such moments. This grief was experienced in confinement and had to be gone through in “a more intimate, family way, more on their own and less as a social occasion” (E1, 11-3-2021).

In a normal context (not in the context of the pandemic), the tendency to shorten and standardise ceremonies (rotating the use of funeral facilities contributes to this to a large extent), as well as to simplify rituals (accepting that the sooner they end, the better), makes the work of accompanying bereavement more difficult. In the opinions expressed by the professionals who collaborated with public funeral companies, the initial style of bereavement support should not only address the question of well-being, but also involve a further reflection on the social awareness of death. It is suggested that, in order to work correctly with bereavement, people need to be informed about the nature of loss, in order to change the prevailing attitudes of taboo and avoidance, and make it easier to understand what the loss of a loved one entails. This is how one of the interviewees put it: “to remember the person’s life in a healthy way, that makes you grow as a human being, we have to say goodbye well! And we have to go through the process of saying goodbye, which is the process of mourning, and not skip it” (E2, 5-3-2021).

The interviewees report that psychological care in times of pandemic exceeded all previously defined levels of demand, and support teams had to be organised, permanent helplines had to be set up, online consultation and follow-up channels had to be opened, and numerous pamphlets and guides for users of funeral services had to be published. Experiences were discussed regarding mutual support groups from different social entities that were set up during the pandemic to provide emotional, psychological, and therapeutic support to people who had lost their relatives to coronavirus. These initiatives, which arose outside the funeral environment, reveal a great deal about the need to complete unfulfilled mourning, and the proof that this accompaniment can also be provided outside cemeteries and funeral services³¹.

In addition, there are many people who, on attending a burial in a cemetery, are surprised by the scale and majesty of some of the tombs. The artistic and architectural heritage hidden in municipal cemeteries has been enhanced in recent decades as a way of recovering a part of our collective memory in relation to death. In this regard, the managers of cemetery spaces have requested the participation of specialists to give this heritage a higher profile in order to change

³¹ Among the different initiatives that were presented during the interviews, the “Compassionate communities of care and prevention of complicated bereavement”, an initiative developed by Madrid Salud, as an autonomous body of Madrid City Council (<<https://madridsalud.es/prevencion-del-duelo-complicado/>, accessed 21 April 2021>), is still in operation.

the image of cemeteries and death in general. The professionals interviewed also highlighted the educational value of cemeteries, while at the same time warning of the progressive dissociation of cemeteries from society: “changes in rituals are leading to a lack of empathy between current generations and cemeteries, and this endangers the conservation of a very important funerary heritage that allows us to understand the society of each moment” (E3, 9-3-2021).

The cataloguing of unique tombs and the development of conservation measures is combined with the dissemination of this heritage (publications) and the programming of cultural activities (night visits, concerts, theatrical performances, etc.). These are small-scale activities, aimed at a very specific public, and are more significant from a qualitative than a quantitative point of view. The development of so-called funeral tourism is still a minority activity, far removed from the other tourist attractions offered by a town³². However, in the opinion of the professionals interviewed, it represents a starting point from which to develop new cultural, educational, and awareness-raising initiatives to change the social perception of death. The need to work on a didactic approach to death is aimed at younger generations in particular, whom it seems society wants to protect from its emotional impact. Without this pedagogical approach, not only is the taboo of dealing with death perpetuated, but young people are denied the necessary resources to cope with it: “children who are now 25 or 30 years old have not seen their parents mourn. And if you haven’t seen how something is done, how do you do it?” (E1, 11-3-2021); “it is essential that children go to cemeteries, to mortuaries, that children take part in the ritual of mourning and saying goodbye” (E4, 11-3-2021).

Furthermore, in the same way that mourning needs to be accompanied by the participation of organisations and support groups outside the funeral environment, the preservation of heritage and the development of cultural activities around death must also have a certain social compliance. Although not as widespread in Spanish society as in others, there are some examples of cultural entities dedicated to the preservation of heritage spaces in cemeteries. They contribute to improving society’s receptiveness to the conservation and value of cemeteries and facilitate citizen ownership of these spaces. As “open books” (E5, 16-3-2021), cemeteries can be read because they show how a society has dealt with death and the memory of the deceased. However, in order to do so, it is necessary to offer guidelines that allow these spaces to be interpreted, through this type of cultural activities, which are being programmed once more now the pandemic period is over.

³² One of the professionals interviewed (E3, 9-3-2021) advocated “emotional tourism”, in which the cemetery - whether or not it is the place where our deceased rest - can be interpreted as a space from which to reconstitute the grief experienced, through the development of activities that serve to rethink the meaning of life and death.

5.3 Lay knowledge based on personal experiences

In March 2021, the Centro de Investigaciones Sociológicas (CIS) carried out a survey on the mental health of Spaniards during the pandemic³³. It showed that 23.4% of those interviewed recognised that they were afraid of dying due to coronavirus, and that 68.6% feared that a family member or loved one might die. Only two months earlier, the CIS opinion barometer asked a question about euthanasia (the previous time this question was included was in 2011), and 72.4% of respondents were in favour of the regulation of this right by law. We must go back to 2002 to see that death was not at the forefront of Spaniards' minds, with only 14.1% thinking about it regularly, compared to 18.6% who never did. Unlike in other Western countries, Spain does not usually conduct surveys on attitudes towards death, so we have little information to tell us what Spanish society thinks about it. The idea of convening nineteen people to form three discussion groups to talk about the future of cemeteries in times of pandemic and, consequently, also to talk about death, was not intended to fill this information gap. The aim was to compare the opinions of managers, professionals and citizens with no knowledge of the funeral sector, and to mix expert and lay knowledge.

Without needing to know in detail how funeral services operate, we all have knowledge derived from experiences of emotion and grief at the loss of our loved ones. It is inseparable from life, and we learn through the experiences of loss that we accumulate as we grow up. The opinions expressed by the participants in the three discussion groups came, majoritarily, from these experiences (some even recently) and, moreover, in the context of the exceptional health situation caused by the pandemic. The opinions were structured around five main themes that were intended to lead the debate in the discussion groups: the image we have of cemeteries, changes in the ways of dealing with death, the business surrounding death, spaces of remembrance and memory and, as a final question, has the pandemic changed our understanding of death?

A combination of personal experiences and cultural imagery explains the vision of cemeteries that we tend to share. These images do not always identify cemeteries as a pleasant place that is valued by society, however. Thus, cemeteries are described as follows:

warehouse of the dead, rationalised space, walls that separate, place of memory, replica of the city, materiality, alien space, silence, outskirts, periphery, non-daily life, space of a single use, on the outskirts of our emotions, crowded, blocks of niches, closed, sadness, gloomy, isolated, where death is celebrated but not life...

³³ See <http://www.cis.es/cis/opencms/ES/9_Prensa/Noticias/2021/prensa0494NI.html> (accessed 18 April 2021).

This last definition sums up what the cemetery is for our society: a space dedicated to caring for the deceased and not so much for the living. The cemetery managers suggested adopting an emotional angle to the way cemetery spaces and funeral services are understood but this was not always echoed in the opinion of the regular citizens. They do not deny the fact that there is an interest in visiting some particular cemeteries, but this changes when it is those where their loved ones are buried: "I like cemeteries, but don't talk to me about cemeteries when it is something that affects me" (C1 Focus group 2, 17-6-2021). Emotional proximity interferes with what would otherwise be a purely recreational visit: "it is not the same to come across a pile of graves, of tombs of people you don't know as it is to go through a space where you know who most of the dead and their families are" (C2 Focus group 1, 14-6-2021).

The fact that cemetery spaces are contained within walls - both to protect the dead and not to disturb the living - makes any attempt towards proximity difficult. It is argued that this would perhaps be easier to achieve in those cemeteries that look like gardens which are more typical in other societies. On the other hand, the estrangement experienced with respect to this space is also generated by the way in which it has been designed, in responding to the need to guard the mortal remains of our deceased. Apart from monumental cemeteries, the rationalisation that creates large blocks of superimposed and uniform niches discourages any interest in visiting modern cemeteries. The only way to establish a direct affiliation between cemetery spaces and the municipalities they serve is for the deceased to be recognised by locals and outsiders alike. In other words, that the space becomes meaningful because it is "there" where loved ones are laid to rest.

Changes in the way people deal with death also involve changing their relationship with cemeteries. To begin with, the cemetery has been replaced by the mortuary: "we spend almost more time at the mortuary than at the cemetery, as hardly anyone accompanies the deceased to be buried or cremated, and you are even asked not to go" (C3 Focus group 2, 17-6-2021). The changes can also be explained in generational terms, as the rituals that once had a very specific function, in which the cemetery played a much more important role, have ceased to take place. This way of understanding death had an indisputably social component, which served as sustenance and emotional support for families who had lost a loved one. It is said that death was more present, more every day, but fundamentally it was a social issue, both in the organisation of funerals as an act that had a socialising component (that is, it taught new generations to know how to be and respond to the death of their own and others), in the experience of

mourning (which symbolically marked social times and spaces, and was inscribed on the body of the mourners) and in the maintenance of memory (for which the visit to the cemetery and the care of the grave were fundamental).

Some elements of funerary practices that our society maintains today seem to have disappeared. From the celebration of death (that is, from a formalised and tacitly accepted ritual act), there is a shift to discomfort in the face of death (in which offering condolences, attending the wake or the funeral of the deceased, or visiting the grave, becomes a social obligation, not to mention a nuisance): “death is seen as a complication, because I don’t think we celebrate death. And, what’s more, if a person is a little bit down, either because of death or other issues, we separate ourselves from them because it feels like they steal our energy” (C4 Discussion group 3, 21-6-2021).

The loss of this dimension of strong social support in the face of death, and the delegation of funeral care to specialised companies, has become more evident during the pandemic and in the face of the excess mortality that it caused. This set of transformations straddles three very different generations with regard to their attitudes to death: the generation that knew (and experienced) these traditional practices, the generation that has gradually detached itself from these social obligations, and the generation that has not yet placed death at the top of its list of vital concerns. One person recalls how on All Saints’ Day the visit to the deceased represented “an act of socialisation that brings together as many people as even the village festivals, because you go walking around and it reminds you of the dead you have known”. However, all this is changing, producing a process of “dissociation”, in which visits to the cemetery are abandoned “and flowers are ordered from florists so you don’t have to go there” (C5 Discussion group 2, 17-6-2021).

Perhaps because the idea of quickly overcoming the experience of death and detaching ourselves from these collective obligations has become part of our social conscience, it is possible to understand the rapid acceptance of cremation as an alternative funerary practice to burial, a practice which has relatively significant percentages in Spain. The opinions put forward in the discussion groups present it as a more practical and economical solution than burial, although it has a clear ecological impact (due to the energy expenditure involved and the expulsion of micro-particles into the atmosphere). The question of the final destination of the ashes is also discussed, with divergent views on where they should (or can) be deposited (preferably in the natural environment), in columbarium or in specially dedicated spaces inside cemeteries. It is precisely this reduction of the body to ashes that opens up the possibility of designing micro-cemeteries, which can be placed much closer to where people live.

The other issue that generated even more debate among the participants in the focus groups was the cost of funeral services. In general, critical arguments were voiced against what is interpreted as the commodification of death, and in relation to what are generally considered to be high costs. The privatisation of these services is a cause for debate, as for some it opens the door to depersonalisation in funeral care (“what you need is to be accompanied at a time when you are not there to make decisions” (C6 Discussion group 1, 14-6-2021), but for others it should not be a problem, if people are cared for appropriately in the situation they are going through: “the problem is not that there is a private person managing it, but how, from the public sector, certain rights are guaranteed, respecting the diversity of the population and also guaranteeing the right to a dignified death” (C3 Focus group 2, 17-6-2021).

Public intervention is expected as a way to guarantee a dignified burial in conditions of equality, and to avoid inappropriate practices and situations. This is of particular interest, as it reminds us of the existing social inequalities, that death is not a “social equaliser that makes us all equal” (C7 Discussion group 1, 14-6-2021), but that there are still forms of discrimination that should be considered.

The proposal of managers and experts to think of cemeteries as spaces oriented towards remembrance and memory does not always fit with what was expressed in the discussion groups, given that remembrance of the deceased is not necessarily “located” in them: “I think that memories, in the end you take them with you, don’t you? At least for me, I don’t need that reference point to keep those memories” (C3 Focus group 2, 17-6-2021). It becomes difficult to spatially fix memories in the face of the modern condition, one characterised by itinerancy, transnationality, and delocalisation. However, in the context of the transformations that take place around death, the memory of our ancestors is conditioned by two contradictory premises: nobody wants to be forgotten, and trusts that their relatives and friends will remember them (“we die when we are no longer remembered”, C8 Focus group 3, 21-6-2021); but on the other hand, we live in a society characterised by forgetfulness and collective amnesia. Obituaries are replaced by the practice of taking photos of the deceased. We have simply changed the format in order to continue to keep our memories of them. With the overabundance of images on our devices, as is often the case, they are doomed to be lost in our digital memories.

The pandemic was a “slap in the face of reality with regard to death” (C9 Focus group 2, 17-6-2021), but it generated more fear than awareness of it. Undoubtedly, the fact of witnessing a situation of mass death made many

people think about our proximity to death, which had only been experienced in exceptional situations in the past: “there was a moment during the pandemic when we did feel a sense of collective death, and it seemed that this feeling of collective death was going to make us change things. But we forget everything very quickly, we are forgetful, and we replace one idea with another” (C10 Focus group 1, 14-6-2021).

There was agreement on the importance of social considerations during the pandemic, which automatically generated a network of support and protection, but which in time seemed to be a mirage motivated by collective fear. The new normality has only meant returning to the same point we were at before the pandemic, increasing the vulnerability and fragility of sectors of the population already punished by the previous financial crisis. The obligation to learn from what has happened cannot compete with the need to move on from the tragedy and turn the page. Despite this, despite all that has been learned, only one observation remains, derived from the absence experienced during the pandemic: “one of the few reliefs we feel in the face of death is to have people close to us, and to be embraced by the people we love” (C1 Focus group 2, 17-6-2021).

6. Conclusion

This text has analysed the impact of the pandemic on cemeteries and funeral companies in Spain based on information about the care of the deceased and their relatives in this exceptional situation, which prevented the ordinary funeral services and farewell ceremonies from taking place. The reports produced by the funeral sector itself show the effects caused by the excess mortality resulting from the spread of coronavirus, and the response of the funeral service companies in a context of uncertainty, precarious resources, and little social recognition of their work. The two main periodicals in the sector explain the set of measures that cemeteries and mortuaries had to deploy throughout the pandemic. In this exceptional context, which strained the capacity of the funeral sector to the utmost, we have considered some reflections on the presence of cemetery spaces in the face of social transformations in relation to death and dying. In addition to the assessment outlined by those within the funeral sector, the points of view of professionals who have collaborated with the sector, as well as those of people who have no connection with it, are incorporated to provide other perspectives on the present and future of cemeteries. The combination of expert and lay knowledge provides an opportunity to relate the viewpoint of cemetery managers, who are concerned with continuing to offer a service that meets the funeral needs of Spanish society (which are in full transformation), with that of

people whose knowledge of these spaces derives from personal experience of the loss of loved ones. However, the two views do not always coincide in terms of what the cemeteries of the future should be like. One of the points of agreement between the two areas of knowledge is perhaps the need to vindicate the priority of care for people, of dignity in the treatment of the deceased and their relatives, and to transform the way in which we deal with death and dying socially.

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