

Burial of the body or cremation?

Moratorium a chance to study uses and cemeteries in diocese

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This is the will of my Father, says the Lord, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, and that I should raise it up on the last day.

(Alleluia Verse from the Funeral Rite, from John 6:39)

On Jan. 17 of this year, our diocese entered into a moratorium on the construction and expansion of columbaria within the diocese. During the moratorium, a study is being done regarding the use of columbaria and cemeteries in our diocese.

When decisions are being made regarding the final arrangements for the body after death, the choice of burial of the body or cremation of the body are often presented as equal alternatives by our American culture.

The Catholic Church, however, does not consider the burial of the body and cremation of the body to be equally weighted alternatives. The Church prefers the burial of the body of the deceased over cremation of the body.

The Order of Christian Funerals, revised after Vatican Council II and promulgated in 1969, is the rite that is used for the celebration of funerals of the faithful departed. In 1997, the Vatican approved an Appendix to the Order of Christian Funerals which contained texts to be used for the celebration of funeral rites in the presence of the cremated remains of the deceased.

Of great interest in this appendix is the affirmation by the American bishops that cremation does not enjoy the same value as burial of the body. The preferred arrangement for the human body after death is burial of the body.

This preference for burial of the body is expressed in the following words: “The Church clearly prefers and urges that the body of the deceased be present for the funeral rites, since the presence of the human body better expresses the values which the Church affirms in those rites.

“The Church’s teaching in regard to the human body as well as the Church’s preference for burial of the body should be a regular part of catechesis on all levels, and pastors should make particular efforts to preserve this important teaching” (nn. 413-414).

Reasons for burial

What are the reasons for the Church’s preference that the body of the deceased be present for the funeral rites and that the body be buried rather than cremated? The Order of Christian Funerals gives three reasons.

The first reason for the preference that the body of the deceased Christian be buried and not cremated is that the Lord himself willed to be buried. This is expressed in the following way:

“The funeral is to be celebrated according to the model in use in the region. It should be carried out in a way, however, that clearly expresses the Church’s preference for the custom of burying the dead, after the example of Christ’s own will to be buried.” (n. 15).

The second reason for the Church’s preference is that values on the natural level are affirmed by the presence of the body at the funeral rites and the burial of the body. The presence of the body at the funeral rites expresses in a natural way the manner we had been accustomed to relate to the person while he or she was alive, namely through a human body.

The rite uses the following words to express this:

“The Christian faithful are unequivocally confronted by the mystery of life and death when they are faced with the presence of the body of one who has died. Moreover, the body which lies in death naturally recalls the personal story of faith, the loving family bonds, the friendships, and the words and acts of kindness of the deceased person.

“Indeed, the human body is inextricably associated with the human person, which acts and is experienced by others through that body. It is the body whose hands clothed the poor and embraced the sorrowing.” (n. 411).

The third reason for the Church’s preference is that values on the supernatural level are affirmed by the presence of the body at the funeral rites and the burial of the body. The presence of the body at the funeral rites expresses Jesus’ teaching regarding the supernatural dignity and destiny of the human body.

The rite expresses this in the following words:

“The body of a deceased Catholic Christian is also the body once washed in baptism, anointed with the oil of salvation, and fed with the Bread of Life. Thus, the Church’s reverence for the sacredness of the human body grows out of a reverence and concern both natural and supernatural for the human person.

“The body of the deceased brings forcefully to mind the Church’s conviction that the human body is in Christ a temple of the Holy Spirit and is destined for future glory at the resurrection of the dead. This conviction in faith finds its expression in a sustained and insistent prayer that commends the deceased person to God’s merciful care so that his or her place in the communion of the just may be assured.

“A further expression is the care traditionally taken to prepare the bodies of the deceased for a burial that befits their dignity, in expectation of their final resurrection in the Lord.” (n. 412).

These three reasons influence the Church's reverence for the sacredness of the human body in death, and explain the Church's preference for the presence of the body at the funeral rites and burial of the body over cremation.

The Order of Christian Funerals presents cremation as an exception to the normal situation of burial of the body. The rite allows the Christian faithful to have recourse to cremation "when extraordinary circumstances make the cremation of a body the only feasible choice." (n. 415).

Circumstances which go far beyond the usual or regular situation may make cremation the only feasible choice in certain individual cases. For example, an infection by a fatal communicable disease or deadly bacterial agent which does not die with the death of the person might be one such extraordinary circumstance to recommend cremation of the body, in order to prevent the outbreak of an epidemic.

Our American culture asserts that since the human body eventually decomposes anyway, cremation should be employed in order to hasten the inevitable natural process. The Order of Christian Funerals, however, proposes that the burial of the body is to be preferred because the Lord Jesus himself willed to be buried. (n. 15).

Our American culture asserts that the human body is of no use once we die, so we should not fuss so much over it. The Order of Christian Funerals, however, proposes that the burial of the body is to be preferred because the human body of the Christian is a temple of the Holy Spirit and is destined for future glory at the resurrection of the dead. (n. 412).

Pastoral planning

A moratorium is a time of study. It is an opportunity to engage in pastoral planning regarding the use of columbaria and cemeteries in our diocese.

To be addressed during this period of study is the observation that the Church is now apparently promoting cremation over burial of the body, since it provides columbaria on-site at some parish churches but does not offer at those locations the option of burial of the body.

With utmost love, God in his Providence cares for each one of us during our pilgrimage on earth, and when we die He receives our body with tenderness and grants us a period of rest until the day of resurrection. Jesus himself experienced this great providential love of the Father.

The Gospel writers tell us that Jesus commended his spirit into the Father's hands and entrusted his human body into the hands of his disciple to be cared for after his death: Joseph of Arimathea took Jesus' body down from the cross, and with Nicodemus tenderly dressed the body, prepared it for burial, and then reverently placed the body in his own tomb.

Because of the witness of the New Testament Scriptures, the death of a Christian is often referred to as a falling asleep in the Lord, awaiting the day of resurrection (Mark 5: 35-43; 1 Thess. 4: 13-18).

May our Christian hope in our own resurrection on the last day, when the soul will be reunited with the body, strengthen our conviction that God's love is indeed stronger than death.