

“TO RISE WITH CHRIST”

UNDERSTANDING CATHOLIC BURIAL THEOLOGY

The moment the question rolled off my tongue, I regretted it. I’m told that a good lawyer never asks a question to which he or she does not know the answer. In this case, I had more than a hunch and should have listened to that “inner voice” and let it go. Instead, I asked the college kid behind the store counter, “May I ask what is hanging from the chain around your neck?” His answer, “Oh that? Yes, it is a vial containing my grandfather’s ashes. We all received one at his funeral.” Obviously, in that moment, while checking out, I wasn’t about to initiate a discussion about this recent custom. It is clearly on the increase. Today, anyone even hinting that such a practice may not be entirely appropriate ought to be prepared for pushback. Yet, I am convinced that the Catholic faithful need to hear cogent reasons for the Church’s teaching and pastoral practice, even in such matters as death and burial.

When we die, we must be “away from the body and at home with the Lord.” (2 Cor. 5:8). We Catholics believe that when we die, our body is separated from the soul until the end of time, at which point the soul and body will be reunited in the final resurrection. The 5 July 1963 Vatican instruction entitled *Piam et Constantem*, even while noting the “*reverent and unbroken*” tradition of burial, opened the door for the Church to allow cremation, albeit with strict caveats. The instruction clearly states that “all necessary measures must be taken to preserve the practice of reverently burying the faithful departed.” It had been forbidden in part due to secret societies that deliberately denied the Catholic belief in the **resurrection of the body** and the **immortality of the soul**. Those particular concerns were not as prevalent in this country, but no one may choose cremation in support of erroneous ideas. By the 5th century A.D., the practice of cremation had pretty much died out (no pun intended).

Centuries later, customs shifted once again. Bishops from several countries in which sanitary, economic or social considerations made traditional burial a challenge and hardship sought permission for cremation. In 1960, only 3.6% of Americans chose cremation. The cremation rate is astronomically higher here today, at **just over 50%**. In **Japan**, there is nearly a 100% cremation rate. Even if cremation is chosen, it is praiseworthy to offer a funeral Mass in the presence of the body, and afterwards proceed towards cremation. I have celebrated a number of funerals like this. The principal advantage is the closure that occurs in viewing the body in the casket. There is a finality in this act, even though our own experience acknowledges that it is extremely difficult. But it provides a level of closure that seems hard to replicate with a photograph. Family members at times have vastly differing views on cremation, and it can be a source of significant tension, in cases lacking specificity in a parent’s burial preferences.

While this is a delicate subject, in actuality following cremation, the remains are not actually “ashes,” but rather pulverized bone fragments. In Catholic piety, a bone chip is considered a first-class relic, and in the case of saints there are strict rules about how those remains ought to be preserved and revered. It is simply inappropriate to carry a vial of cremated remains on one’s person. Why? Because the human body is sacred, we choose not to store cremated remains on the living room mantle, nor scatter them into their favorite fishing lake, etc. We neither rejoin “Mother Earth” nor become fused with the universe. Even less are human ashes regenerated into the earth in a pantheistic sense. If our home is in heaven, then that is where we belong on the last day. In the intervening period (who can know its duration?), we fittingly reverence the dead through dedicated spaces in blessed cemeteries, encouraging the faithful to pray at the site of their loved one’s graves. While Catholic teaching clearly shows a preference for a funeral in the presence of the body, it respects all legitimate options. Cremation is typically more affordable, no small matter considering the costs associated with funerals today.

The **Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith** document issued on 15 August 2016 *Ad resurgendum cum Christo* (“To Rise with Christ”) clarified that “cremation of the deceased’s body does not affect his or her soul, nor does it prevent God, in his omnipotence, from raising up the deceased body to new life. Thus cremation, in and of itself, objectively negates neither the Christian doctrine of the soul’s immortality nor that of the resurrection of the body.” (Para. #4). In the following paragraph we read: “The reservation of the ashes of the departed in a sacred place ensures that they are not excluded from the prayers and remembrance of their family

or the Christian community. It prevents the faithful departed from being forgotten, or their remains from being shown a lack of respect, which eventuality is possible, most especially once the immediately subsequent generation has too passed away. Also, it prevents any unfitting or superstitious practices.” You may be surprised to learn that we have brought cremated remains to funeral homes for burial when, after many months had passed, the remains went unclaimed.

A key teaching is contained in paragraph #7: “In order that every appearance of pantheism, naturalism or nihilism be avoided, it is not permitted to scatter the ashes of the faithful departed in the air, on land, at sea or in some other way, nor may they be preserved in mementos, pieces of jewelry or other objects.” Many choose to sprinkle “ashes” because they believe it is meaningful to the deceased, representing a significant place dear to their heart, or some activity of which they were particularly fond. While I understand this desire to honor connections that were significant in life, I fear that sentimentality is carrying the day. It is vital that we balance the love of an individual within the greater context of our call to eternal life in Christ Jesus and the reverence we owe to the body, a temple of the Holy Spirit.

- **Bobby Doerr**, the oldest living Hall of Famer in Major League baseball, died at **age 99!** He played alongside **Ted Williams** in Fenway Park and against **Lou Gehrig and Joe DiMaggio**. Each offseason, he’d return to Oregon to go fly-fishing, living with his family in cabins lit by kerosene lamps and heated by wood stoves and no indoor plumbing. The money wasn’t quite as good back then! He was a devoted Christian, and lived in retirement with his sister, a Catholic. He quipped, “We both have the same manager. There is life beyond baseball, and I’d recommend that to anyone!”
- Congratulations to **Archbishop Hebda** who was recently elected to the **Catholic Relief Services** board, the official international humanitarian agency of the Catholic Church in the United States. In 2016, over \$44 million in emergency aid was distributed worldwide, including those affected by the crisis in Iraq and Syria. I vividly recall my grade school days, with our annual Lenten Rice Bowl collections.
- **Papal Lamborghini?** That’s right– someone donated a snazzy white sports car with yellow trim. After autographing it, Pope Francis is putting it up for auction to benefit three charities, among them *Aid to the Church in Need*, a wonderful organization that helps Catholics in troubled areas where the faith is persecuted. This money will go to rebuild homes in Iraq.

Sincerely in Christ,

Fr. John L. Ubel,
Rector