

BULLETIN – NOVEMBER 13

Month of the Holy Souls. Last week we reflected on the impact of the simple permission of the Church in 1963 to cremate the bodies of the deceased faithful in cases of serious need. We continue with a few more thoughts about this and other funerary practices which have become increasingly commonplace, particularly in the last 20 years or so.

One of the monumental works of St. John Paul II is his masterful thesis on the Theology of the Body. In this series of talks, originally given to his general audiences over a period of several years, he goes into greatly detailed examination of the Scriptures and the teaching of the Church on who we are as men and women. He arrives at a definitive study of the human body as an integral part of human identity. We are inclined to take this for granted, but our beloved and saintly Holy Father invites us to ponder the mystery of the human body, turning its implications over and over like precious diamonds to catch every possible glint and glitter coming from its various aspects.

The difficulties are twofold. First of all, we in the 21st century are little disposed to ponder things deeply. Philosophy seems to many like a useless enterprise. Why bother thinking about ultimate realities? Why bother thinking about thinking? Just do it, and move on. We are so pragmatic that nearly all our information has to come to us in bullet points, or our dismal attention spans will peter out after the third line. (In fact, if you're still reading this, congratulations! You have the stuff and stamina to make America great again!)

Secondly, one stated goal of the ultra-tech wizards is to map our neural pathways, our mind, our consciousness, and to upload it to whatever technology is available to hold and communicate it. This is the modern version of the story of the Tower of Babel: trying to fashion our own immortality instead of accepting it from God as a gift. You see, projects that fight at all costs against the idea of death are inherently a-theistic. They also assume that the only thing that identifies you as singularly you is your brain, or perhaps more, its contents. Cryonics labs offer a discount for those who wish only to have their brains frozen after death, as though all the unseen things which that gray matter and those neural pathways were able to manifest in life can somehow be preserved like artifacts in a museum: "And over here, we have Father Morrow's intelligence. With a magnifying glass, you can see it rolling around in the bottom of this thimble."

In issuing its new guidelines and directives about the proper disposition of the body, the Church is making the point that preserving one's human mind is no substitute for an eternity in God's presence. We are not just our disembodied minds. Nor are we just the equal of the animals. "Man is a creature composed of body and soul, and made in the image and likeness of God" (*Baltimore Catechism*). Angels are pure spirits. Cute or awesome as they may be, animals are made by God, but not in his image and likeness. We are unique in all of creation, but even that uniqueness is as varied in form as the apparently limitless crystal designs of snowflakes. It is not, however, only our minds which give us identity. Our visage, our fingerprints, our DNA, and so many other physical traits also make up who we are individually. And if we don't think of bodily things like gender, race, and ability as mattering at all to US, we have all been made very much aware of how they matter politically!

St. Paul teaches us in I Corinthians 15 that what we sow in death (the mortal body) is not what we reap in eternal life (the glorified body). In this simple teaching with its overtones from nature, the Apostle echoes the Savior himself who says in John 12 that “Unless the grain of wheat falls to the earth and dies, it remains just a grain of wheat; but if it dies, it bears much fruit” (John 12:24). After the resurrection, his own glorified body had all the marks of his torture and death clearly evident, but they were no longer incapacitating, no longer causing pain or crippling—after just three days! Nature takes much longer. Plant an acorn, and it will be quite some time before you can come back and enjoy the shade of an oak tree. The oak is not just a giant acorn, but the manifestation of all that that acorn contained within it and which it could become.

Many non-Catholics don’t know what to do or say about death, because they have no voice of authority designated by Christ himself to help reveal what is revealed and to caution against what has NOT been revealed. So, they come up with all sorts of things. Reincarnation, for instance, in essence denies the need for a Savior, since it indicates that we save ourselves by coming back in another life as something else until we somehow “get it right.” Spiritualists believe they can communicate with the dead in séances, which in Scripture are clearly condemned for the believer. Some evangelicals and others believe that praying for the dead is useless at best and blasphemous at worst. It can’t help the dead, they say, because they’re either in heaven or hell for all eternity. And it implies that the mercy of God is not an accomplished free gift won by Christ, but must continue to be sought, even after death. Some will say that the dead have no consciousness or knowledge about us, and can neither hear us nor care about us. And since these non-Catholics do not accept the doctrine of the purgatory (or at least its name), “the dead” they are speaking of include even the saints in heaven! This, however, is a clear contradiction of the Book of Revelation, since that book reveals the saints in the Kingdom gathered around God’s throne, singing his praises and interceding for us.

As Candida Moss concludes in her article on the Vatican document in *The Daily Beast* to which we referred last week, “It is in part in response to these new aspirations of immortality that the Vatican is issuing its guidelines: preserving your neural pathways is no substitute for an eternity with God. But equally as significant is their observation that we are not just our disembodied minds. And whatever you think about heaven and hell, burial and cremation, on that second point the Catholic Church is really on to something.”

Congratulations, honor rollers! West Catholic students who have made the first semester honor roll include our following parishioners (and their grade level): Joshua Augdahl (11), Nathan Augdahl (9), Wyatt Davis (10), Margaret Edozie (9), Michael Edozie (11), Holly Holtzclaw (11), Samantha Knight (12), Bridget Kohane (10), Joshua Kohane (11), Olivia Marzolf (10), Ciera Rodney (10), and Joseph Worm (10). Thanks for inspiring us all to do better at our own pursuits, and a promise of prayer for all of our students to continue to do their very best. God bless you!

Fr. Den

Climate change thought for the week: Niagara Falls has frozen over in 1848, 1911, 1932, 2009, twice in 2014, and 2015. The world might be getting warmer, but it seems like these events are getting closer together.