

## **BULLETIN – NOVEMBER 6**

**Month of the Holy Souls.** The month of November recalls the Church’s “harvest time,” imitating what is going on in nature in the autumn of the year. Just in time for the month of November, traditionally a special time for us to offer prayers for those who have gone before us in death, the Vatican’s Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith a couple weeks ago released a new statement on cremation and burial.

Some articles and pundits in the secular press have suggested that Catholics around the globe were “shocked” at the “new” restrictions, since cremation has been permitted for deceased Catholics since 1963. That shows how little in touch the media are with genuine Catholic teaching, since even that 1963 document expressed great reserve about the practice. It was a doctrinal and pastoral response to the needs of an increasingly transient society, when people were dying in greater and greater numbers far from home, in another state, in another country, or even on another continent. More and more people were spending more and more time far from home, so there was a greater possibility of death far from their anticipated place of burial. It was also hoped that most Christians were beyond the influence of pagan and atheistic views of death which influenced a leaning toward cremation in those cultures.

As with most permissions, the narrow circumstances allowed by way of exception became, over time, a common practice to which few people gave any thought. “I don’t want people staring at me in the casket.” Keep the lid on it, as perhaps you should have in life! No problem. “It’s a lot cheaper.” Ah, there’s the rub! Why show any reverence for the dead by spending any more than you absolutely have to? But any funeral director can help you find ways to minimize the cost, and the Church will certainly not ask anyone who is truly destitute to pay for what is a corporal work of mercy, burying the dead. So again, no problem. “But we’re running out of land to bury the dead!” Don’t panic. A quick ride in the countryside will tell you there’s plenty of unused land, and most cemeteries are quite environment-friendly. Again, no problem. “But he wanted to be scattered on Lake Michigan! I want to keep her ashes on the mantle so she’s with me!” No, no, we need to let them go, as a service of love for both them *and* us. Our loved ones are not playthings, and their bodies are not toys or keepsakes. *And*, the Church has been clear on this point all along: the ashes or cremains are to be buried or entombed ***just as*** we would bury or entomb the intact body of the deceased. There was **NEVER** any Church permission to do otherwise. Burial is and has always been the *preferred* disposition of the human body. So again, no real problem, unless people assumed incorrectly that the Church didn’t care one way or the other. But all they had to do was ask. And casual conversation at the supermarket, the hair salon, or the brew pub is not necessarily the way to get correct answers about the faith.

*The Daily Beast* is an Internet site that advertises itself as “a smart, speedy take on the news from around the world.” Columnist Candida Moss certainly helps the medium live up to its intent in a very thoughtfully refreshing article she wrote on October 30. Unlike so many in the secular media, she actually studies the Vatican document to get beyond the “headliners” and bullet points, to connect what in Catholic doctrine and practice has prompted the Church’s reaffirmation for its one billion believers. What she finds is most perceptive.

Moss admonishes the cynics whose anti-religious reflexes lead them to imagine that all Church doctrine and practice is somehow motivated only by money and power. She notes that Catholic priests officiate at funerals for nominal offerings (or less), and there are Catholic groups like the St. Joseph of Arimathea Society whose apostolate is to provide funerals for the poor free of charge.

The Church is definitely opposed to the commercialization of the disposition of cremains—shooting them into space, turning them into pendants or “diamonds” or frisbies or even tattoos, dividing them up into mementos, etc. All these things have pagan and anti-Christian origins, treating the body of the deceased as a mere curiosity rather than as what it has been through baptism and the other sacraments, a temple of the Holy Spirit. The Vatican document is clear: “When the deceased notoriously has requested cremation and the scattering of their ashes for reasons contrary to the Christian faith, a Christian funeral must be denied to that person according to the norms of the law.” We should note further that it is more important to respect the body and person of the deceased rather than their unreasonable or poorly formed “wishes.” Relatives are under no more obligation to carry out directives of scattering ashes than they would be to sing racist or obscene slogans at the funeral “according to the wishes of the deceased.”

Similarly, how often we note in contemporary obituaries that “according to the wishes of the deceased, there will be no visitation and no services.” That would be another unreasonable request. Our sense of charity and mercy **MUST** lead us at the very least to have a funeral Mass in the parish church, as we pray for our fellow sinner. Whatever led to such a bizarre request -- false humility, fear of expense, hatred of humanity – this member of the human family had and **HAS** a dignity bestowed by the Creator, not by themselves and not by us. Forget the “celebration of life” nonsense. The appropriate place for that is at the visitation and lunch/reception, which are optional. It’s the celebration of the Eucharist (or at least a Vigil or a Liturgy of the Word, if most of the attendees would not be Catholic) which is central to our faith. In the Mass, we pray that the sufferings and death of our brother or sister may be accepted by and united to Christ in his self-offering to the Father. We pray that the clouds of the end of life may be lifted and the beatific vision of God may dawn in the eternal **NOW** of life forever.

We’ll continue this commentary next week. For now, let’s understand that the 1963 “permission” of cremation was not done to steer people away from burial or entombment of the body, but was a response to a genuine pastoral need: the distance people might have to transport the intact body of a loved one to bring them “home” to their intended resting place. What was sensibly allowed in exceptional circumstances has alarmingly become the norm in many places, contrary to the mind of the Church. “By burying the bodies of the faithful, the Church confirms her faith in the resurrection of the body, and intends to show the great dignity of the human body as an integral part of the human person whose body forms part of their identity.” And to quote the Lord Jesus, who was himself buried prior to his own resurrection, “Unless the grain of wheat falls to the earth and dies, it remains just a grain of wheat; but if it dies it produces much fruit” (John 12:24).

**VOTE!!! VOTE!!! VOTE!!!** Not three times, just once. But do it, this Tuesday. God has placed us in this place (the U.S.) and time (2016) for a purpose. The

vote is a gift he gives you to make a difference. Don't shirk your duty as a Christian. God bless you.

Fr. Den

**Thought for the week:** “Deep-seated cultural codes, *religious beliefs*, and structural biases have to be changed” (Hillary Rodham Clinton, 1947- , describing her progressive vision at the Women in the World Summit in New York, Thursday, April 23, 2015). (Emphasis mine. Who would *you* want rewriting our catechism?)