

Catechism of the Catholic Church on Cremation: “The church permits cremation, provided that it does not demonstrate a denial of faith in the resurrection of the body” (2301).

Code of Canon Law on Cremation: “The church earnestly recommends that the pious custom of burying the bodies of the dead be observed; it does not, however, forbid cremation unless it has been chosen for reasons which are contrary to Christian teaching” (Can. 1176.3).

From the **USCCB: The *Order of Christian Funerals*** Appendix on Cremation states: “Although cremation is now permitted by the Church, it does not enjoy the same value as burial of the body. 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” (no. 413).

To Rise with Christ

By Michael Pakaluk; From The Catholic Thing, May 15, 2018

If you are in St. Andrews, Scotland, on a Sunday, you will find that the famous Old Course closes to golf for that day and opens to anyone who wants to walk it. Consider this old tradition a gift of John Knox to the world. That austere Reformer was surely wrong to forbid games on Sunday. Yet it seems eminently right to ask even golf to testify that something else is greater. Be that as may be, the course becomes a town park for the day.

One Sunday I was there and walking the course briskly, gaining on a group several hundred yards ahead. I was shocked to see a man in that group disposing of his old lunch on the course. Or so it seemed from a distance. He would at intervals reach into his sack, and toss what seemed crumbs onto the fairway. This angered me. So, I walked even faster, so that I could ask this man to stop spoiling, through his thoughtlessness, the common good of this beautiful terrain.

When I got close enough, I saw that it was not crumbs but human remains (“ashes”) in the bag. My anger converted to pity. As I overtook them and exchanged greetings, the man explained that his father loved golf very much, and that he and his siblings had journeyed from the States to St. Andrews, to honor his father’s wish of scattering the ashes on that course. I was constrained, of course, to say something upbeat and sympathetic.

I was put in the position, so common, of knowing objectively that my fellow man was doing something deeply wrong, yet having the opportunity, in a superficial exchange, of addressing only the man’s subjective intentions.

Let’s be clear that what they were doing was, objectively, deeply wrong. First of all, my initial impression was not inaccurate: that man was, after all, doing the sort of thing one would do with an old lunch. Yet he was doing this to the remains of his beloved father! Secondly, those remains were tossed to the ground, exposed, and for all I knew, I had already trampled them underfoot!

As the old Catholic Encyclopedia puts it in the article on “Cremation”: “[The Church] holds it unseemly that the human body, once the living temple of God, the instrument of heavenly virtue, sanctified so often by the sacraments, should finally be subjected to a treatment that filial piety, conjugal and fraternal love, or even mere friendship seems to revolt against as inhuman.”

Thirdly, the man in his actions was testifying to something false. I do not know what he individually believed. But our actions often have a meaning and testify to something regardless of what we believe. The scattering of ashes inevitably testifies to pantheism, naturalism, or nihilism. In this case, it was some kind of pantheism – the false religion that the golf course is itself hallowed, and that, through the scattering, the deceased father can become united to this idol.

Now, on these points, I find that the *Catechism*, as on other matters, is correct as far as it goes but liable to mislead by omission. “The Church permits cremation,” it says, “provided that it does not demonstrate a denial of faith in the resurrection.”

Let us admit straightaway that the resurrection of the dead cannot be defeated by “the mode of sepulcher” (as it used to be called). The Jewish people never cremated the dead. The Romans were open to cremation as well as burial. In this context, the early Christians uniformly and definitively followed the Jewish practice. But they insisted equally that they did not do so out of any necessity – “as if God could not raise the dead as easily from a handful of ash as from dust in the earth.”

So cremation is not excluded; that is true. Yet at the same time, as the Code of Canon Law puts it, “The Church earnestly recommends that the pious custom of burying the bodies of the deceased be observed.” (1176, §3) Or, as the USCCB website puts it, quoting a Vatican document: “Although cremation is now permitted by the Church, it does not enjoy the same value as burial of the body.” (no. 413) Even when the remains are cremated, the body should be present at the funeral, and the remains must be preserved in a fitting manner and placed in a holy location such as a cemetery.

It is fitting to reflect on these matters during the Easter time. In fact, *To Rise with Christ* is the name of the instruction on cremation, issued by the CDF on August 15, 2016, and approved by Pope Francis. Its language is very strong, “Following the most ancient Christian tradition, the Church insistently recommends that the bodies of the deceased be buried in cemeteries or other sacred places.”

The Instruction continues, “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. She cannot, therefore, condone attitudes or permit rites that involve erroneous ideas about death, such as considering death as the definitive annihilation of the person, or the moment of fusion with Mother Nature or the universe, or as a stage in the cycle of regeneration, or as the definitive liberation from the ‘prison’ of the body.”

“My greatest pleasure is to go to the cemetery and say my beads,” Fr. Damien of Molokai used to say. And the Instruction praises devotions centered on cemeteries.

It ends on a sobering note: “When the deceased notoriously has requested cremation and the scattering of their ashes for reasons contrary to the Christian faith” – raising the matter to the objective not merely a subjective plane – “a Christian funeral must be denied to that person according to the norms of the law.”

Respect for the Body

By Fr. Gerard E. Murrey; From The Catholic Thing, April 19, 2020

Easter is the revelation of the truth of God’s gift of eternal life to us: Christ is risen, and those united to Him in a living bond of friendship in this life will be given the complete fulfillment of that union in the life to come in Heaven.

This gift of eternal life is given to the whole human person, body and soul. The saved will live forever with God: until the Second Coming of Christ to judge the living and the dead, the souls of those who have died in God’s grace await the resurrection of their bodies in either Heaven or Purgatory. The souls of the damned likewise await the resurrection of their bodies in Hell.

When Christ returns, the bodies of all men, women, and children who have ever lived will be reunited with their souls: the just will be united eternally, body and soul, with God in Heaven, the damned will be separated eternally, body and soul, from God in Hell.

The doctrine of the resurrection of the bodies of the dead at the Final Judgment is frequently not understood or appreciated by believers. We focus mostly on what happens to the soul when we die. We pray for the souls of the faithful departed “may they rest in peace.” It would be well to add “and may they rise in glory from their graves.”

You may have seen the pictures of the mortal remains of coronavirus victims here in New York being buried in Potters Field on Hart Island, just off the coast of The Bronx. The row of coffins, buried together in a long trench grave, is a striking image of death, but also of hope.

We treat the remains of the dead who have no one to claim them for private burial with dignity and respect. This is a societal manifestation of the Judeo-Christian inheritance that reverences the mortal remains of God’s highest creation on earth. Man, made from the dust of the earth, is placed back into that dust upon the completion of his earthly pilgrimage. His body will return to dust, but Christ has taught us that this is not the final word. Those bodies are his, in waiting, and they should be given a fitting resting place.

The worldview inherent in this burial practice was universally appreciated and accepted by Catholics until relatively recently, reinforced by the Church’s requirement to bury the baptized in consecrated ground, when possible, and by the prohibition of cremation, a practice alien to the Christian Faith.

So it's providential that Scott Hahn's book *Hope to Die: The Christian Meaning of Death and the Resurrection of the Body* (co-authored with Emily Stimpson Chapman) has appeared during the current coronavirus plague. Hahn writes eloquently about the reality of death and the nature of heavenly life, and how we will be blessed to learn the meaning of everything if and when we attain the Beatific Vision.

But that vision is not simply a "spiritual" experience: "God will raise the dead – not just spiritually, but physically. After all, if the resurrection were just going to be spiritual, what happened to bodies in death wouldn't matter. But with a physical resurrection, bodies matter. What happens to bodies matters. How bodies are buried matters."

As a priest of thirty-five years, I have seen the rapid spread of cremation among Catholics. This has always troubled me, even though I accept that Pope St. Paul VI authorized this formerly forbidden practice in 1963. As Hahn notes: "To most Christians, for most of the past 2000 years, it was unthinkable that you would choose to utterly destroy bodies destined for glory and already touched by grace. . . .from the very first, Christians buried their dead as Christ had been buried."

Indeed, Christianity developed a culture in which the graves of the dead are visited. The bones of saints are venerated as sacred relics. God, who made our bodies, never commanded that we burn the mortal remains of those who have died. By burying the dead in the earth we entrust that person's body to God, just as we entrust his soul, which has temporarily departed that body.

Hahn reminds us of something that many have forgotten, or never knew: "[The Church] does not approve of cremation; it permits it. It does not permit the scattering of ashes or their retention in homes; it forbids it. It considers burial the most fitting way to care for the bodies of the dead until they rise again on the last day and urges us to follow that recommendation."

Why this reticence about cremation? Hahn looks at what cremation, in contrast with burial, signifies, apart from the subjective intention of those requesting cremation: "Cremation teaches lessons about the body that are directly contrary to what the Church actually believes. It teaches that the body is disposable. It teaches that the body is not an integral part of the human person. And it teaches that the body has no value once the soul is gone – that body has run its course, and there will be nothing more for it. No resurrection. No transformation. No glorification."

Most Catholics who cremate their deceased loved ones do so not because they reject the resurrection of the body at the Last Day. But our treatment of the dead should reflect our hope in the resurrection of the flesh. To be sure, God will resurrect the ashes of those who were cremated and reunite them with their souls. We cannot change or frustrate God's plan for the human race. But we need to ask ourselves: why would we want to obliterate by fire the bodies of the dead that were sanctified in baptism?

Cremation is an essentially pagan custom. Christians should avoid it and honor God by honoring with reverent burial the mortal remains of God's children who have gone before us, in expectation of that grand reunion of all mankind, our bodies and souls united again, at the Final Judgment.

Does the Church approve of donating one's body to science?

The Church allows for donation of the body for medical research, so long as there is an appropriate committal of the body according to the Church's guidelines for burial after the research is completed. You would need to specify in the appropriate legal documents that your body be returned to your family for burial once the research facility to which you have donated it is finished with its study.

When is Organ Donation moral?

Organ donation is a miracle of modern medicine, offering seriously ill patients a chance at new life and health. It also offers donors an opportunity to make a sacrificial self-gift. In an address to the International Congress on Transplants in 2000, Pope John Paul II emphasized what he had said in a similar address in 1991: "The decision to offer without reward a part of one's own body for the health and well-being of another person"

is “a genuine act of love.” Because the human is a substantial union of body and soul, donors give something of *themselves*, not mere organs and tissues.

The Church generally affirms the morality of organ donation. But there are principles we must always keep in mind.

The ethics of organ donation depends on two criteria: 1) whether the patient or the family gives free and informed consent to organ procurement and 2) whether the patient is in fact deceased when vital organs are removed. (The willing donation by the living of non-vital organs, such as one kidney; a lung; or a portion of the liver, the pancreas, or intestines is always permissible.)

The desire to offer one’s organs after death to someone diagnosed with organ failure is noble and should be honored. Here we run into the critical definition that affects criterion number two: the definition of death.

All determinations of death occur after the fact. If some organs are procured too long after the heart stops beating, they are no longer usable because the blood supply to them has ceased. Therefore, the question shifts to a very difficult one, the one raised by the first organ transplant in Cape Town, South Africa in 1967: can organs be removed before life support is stopped? An ethical standard called the Dead Donor Rule (DDR) states the obvious edict that vital organs should be removed only from a dead body and not from a living person.

In optimal circumstances, the ethical path is clear. The patient has suffered a life-ending illness or injury, such as head trauma or brain aneurysm. He has been put on artificial life support to keep the heart beating and oxygenated blood flowing to the organs, but the medical team can clearly determine that brain death has occurred because there is no brain activity, the patient cannot breathe on his own, and no recovery is possible. With full prior written consent of the patient and the family, the death of the donor is declared. The hospital can then notify the organization that collects the organs, a database of patients awaiting transplant can be searched, and provisions can be made to maintain the organs on artificial support while they are transported to the sick patient or patient in need of them. The transplant is successful, and a fatally sick person is cured by the charitable donation of a dying person.

But note: everything in this process is time-critical down to the minute. Hearts and lungs can survive outside the body for only four to six hours, livers up to twelve hours, intestines sixteen, pancreases eighteen, and kidneys thirty-six. It is not hard to see the ethical conflict between certainty of death and desire to harvest transplantable organs.

Robert D. Truog, director of the Harvard Center for Bioethics, is known for exploring the uncomfortable corners of this debate. He advocates for a restructuring of end-of-life ethics and argues that in certain cases, it may be ethical to remove the organs *before* a donor is definitionally dead so the organs may be better preserved for transplant. He judges that procedures such as removing organs while the heart is still beating are ethical if death is imminent.

In a perspective published in 2012 in the *New England Journal of Medicine*, Truog describes the case of a young girl whose parents wanted to donate her organs after she suffered severe brain damage in an accident, reminiscent of the original Cape Town case of 1957. The girl was on life support. Plans were made to withdraw life support and to procure her organs *after death occurred*, in compliance with the Dead Donor Rule.

However, the girl died too slowly. The organs were consequently not viable for transplant, and the parents’ wish for organ donation was not honored. The parents questioned why the organs could not have been removed while they were still in a condition to help another sick person, even if retrieving them would have meant hastening the girl’s imminent death. Truog favors language that allows for a case such as this to be conducted according to the procedure described by the parents—that is, to remove organs before death.

In a hard case like this, it is important to be grounded in Church teaching, particularly the universal edict not to kill an innocent human. Think forward. Should this language about imminent death be accommodated and the Dead Donor Rule abandoned, guidelines and policies can be established that favor the harvesting of organs *over* the dignity of human life. As distraught as a family may be that a loved one cannot donate organs in death, the truth remains: the value of a person’s life does not depend on organ donation.

John Paul II’s 2000 address to the International Congress on Transplants echoes what Pope Pius XII stated more than forty years prior regarding the definition of death. Death is the “total disintegration of that unitary and integrated whole that is the personal self.” Death is the separation of the soul from the body. Regarding the medical definition, whether the traditional cardio-respiratory signs or the neurological signs, John Paul again affirmed his predecessor and emphatically asserted that “the Church does not make technical decisions.”

The Church is concerned with human dignity. If there is “moral certainty” that death has occurred before organ procurement, then it is ethical if consent has been given. That is the guiding principle in both the theological and medical determination of death: moral certainty.

We remember too that future immortality is as certain as mortal death. Even amid suffering, Christians hope for the promised resurrection. This hope fills the believer with “an extraordinary capacity to trust fully in the plan of God” (*Evangelium Vitae* 67).

Human Composting Is Repulsive

By David G Bonagura, Jr.; From The Catholic Thing, January 11, 2023

Without any fanfare, in the closing days of 2022, New York Governor Kathy Hochul quietly signed into law permission for “natural organic reduction,” better known as “human composting.” New York now joins five of the nation’s most progressive states in legalizing the practice. Human composting consists of heating and regularly rotating a human corpse laid inside a container loaded with organic materials. After six to eight weeks, the entire body morphs into soil. The bones are then placed in an incinerator (“cremulator” is the euphemism), burned into more soil, and added to what was once the rest of the body to be tossed into a garden, forest, or horticultural paradise.

The biblical prophecy is now recast: “Remember you are dust, and unto dust you hastily shall be turned. And turned.”

Arguments for human composting, as recently articulated by the *New York Times*, are utilitarian, emotional, and philosophical. It costs less than traditional burial, and, though more expensive than cremation, composting’s version of bone-burning does far less damage to the environment. It satisfies an emotional connection to the earth that includes a desire both to give back to it and to commune with deceased loved ones now enmeshed in it. And it represents a new form of death ritual that has meaning for some, so, in the spirit of moral relativism, we ought to respect each person’s choice.

Advocacy for human composting stems from a philosophical dualism that posits a radical separation between soul and body. In this view, the body is accidental, not essential, to human existence. This is the same philosophy underlying today’s transgender phenomenon. Hence, the body can be treated as a mere instrument: Its natural processes can be thwarted, and its healthy members mutilated to conform it to a distorted idea, or it can be thrown away after death since its connection to the person had no real value in the first place.

Human composting erodes human dignity. I have a compost heap in my backyard. It’s where my family and I throw our organic trash: banana peels, tea bags, coffee grinds, eggshells, inedible fruit and vegetable waste, rotted pumpkins after Halloween.

The human body is not a piece of trash. It is the essential mode of our existence – we are embodied souls. The soul has no life, self-understanding, or experiences apart from the body. A person is more than his body, but cannot live or be conceived of without his body.

Even outside of Christian circles, civilized people believe each person has an inherent dignity that no one may violate. Because of the essential union of soul and body, respecting the dignity of the person necessarily requires respect for the human body. We cannot, for example, do violence to a person physically and claim that we are somehow respecting his soul at the same time. So, we rightly oppose racism and sexism, for the attacks these prejudices wage on account of a body’s appearance attack the person. In exploiting the body, these prejudices dehumanize.

By withering the human body into formless dirt, human composting is another form of dehumanization. If bodies are worthy of respect in life, they are also worthy of it in death. This is why for millennia so many cultures of varying religious faiths have practiced burying their dead: doing so is an act of homage to the person who was once someone’s son, daughter, brother, sister, spouse, parent, friend, neighbor – and should still be honored as such even in death.

Despite appearances, composting a human body is not accelerating a natural process. Yes, bodies decay over time; but, as if nature itself were teaching a lesson on human dignity, bones do not decay. They remain together, fixed in the ground as the markers of a singular, intact being, a reminder of the person who once lived. We consider cemeteries hallowed grounds because they house something special. We allow the dead to rest in

peace as a testament to the fact that these were persons who deserved respect when living, and still deserve respect in death.

Of course, from a Christian perspective, the argument for preserving the body in death is still more profound. With Christmas we celebrate God becoming man, an event that imbued human flesh with divine nobility. The human body is so blessed by God and so essential to human existence that death brings only a temporary separation of soul and body. At the end of time, God will raise our decayed bodies from the earth and transform them into spiritual bodies – just like Christ’s own – with which our souls will reunite. We state this belief each Sunday in the Nicene Creed: “I look forward to the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come.”

When Pope Francis decried our contemporary “throwaway culture” that disregards the poor and the marginalized, he implored us to remember: “No one is disposable!” To this figurative use of the term we must sadly add the literal meaning: no human being, in life or in death, should ever be disposed as trash to rot in a compost heap.

No appeals to consent or love of the earth can justify treating the human body as dirt or turning it into dirt to fluff up our gardens. Building up the earth cannot come at the expense of human dignity, which erodes with the corpse if we tolerate human composting as just another “lifestyle choice.”

States that made human composting legal:

Washington (2019), Colorado, Oregon, Vermont, California, New York (2023)