



Cremains and Respect for the Human Body

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In the famous story of David and Goliath, Goliath boasts to the young David that after he kills him, he will give his flesh “to the birds of the sky and beasts of the field.” He conveys his profound disdain for David by speaking this way, deprecating even his corpse. This offends our sensibility that dead bodies should not be desecrated, but should instead be respectfully buried. Proper disposition and care of another’s body also manifests our Christian faith in the resurrection of that body on the Last Day. Over time, this has evolved into a deeper understanding about the handling of corpses, including regulations surrounding cremation.

For Catholics, cremation is considered an acceptable form of handling the human body after death, although as noted in the *Order of Christian Funerals*, cremation

“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 its rites.”

Moreover, cremation can lead to problematic practices, which Cardinal Raymond Burke references

in a Pastoral letter to the faithful in the Diocese of La Crosse in the year 2000:

“With the growing practice of cremation, there has also developed a certain lack of care for the cremated remains of the dead. Funeral directors who have been asked to store the cremated remains report that those remains often are left unclaimed by family or friends. Those charged with the arrangements for the funeral rites of the deceased should see that the cremated remains are interred or entombed at the earliest possible time..... It is not permitted to scatter cremated remains over a favorite place, and it is not permitted to keep cremated remains in one's home or place other than a cemetery..... The cremated remains of one deceased person may not be mixed with the cremated remains of another person. It is not permitted to divide the cremated remains and inter or entomb them in more than one place.”

These clearly articulated concerns remind us of our

Making Sense of Bioethics

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obligation to respect the remains of the dead, even in their ashen state. By becoming lax in our approach to handling cremains, we can easily betray the respect that is owed.

A story comes to mind involving a friend of mine who works as a pilot. He was asked to take up a passenger in a small plane for the “final repose of ashes” into the ocean. As they were taking off, he told the passenger, “Just be sure that you don’t ever open that urn! It needs to be thrown overboard when I open the hatch window and give you the signal.” The passenger, however, was determined to do it his way, and when the pilot opened the window, he popped off the top of the urn and tried to scatter the ashes at sea. Instead, the ashes were seized by the violent air currents and scattered throughout the internals of the airplane, among all the instrumentation and dials, and in the hair and clothing of both the pilot and the passenger.

Another reason to bury cremains in the earth or inter them in a mausoleum, rather than scattering them abroad, is to establish a particular place to be able to visit and pray for the soul of that person, in the physical presence of their mortal remains. The burial site serves as a point of reference and connection to

the embodiment of that individual, rather than reducing them to a kind of vague and wispy nothingness.

Keeping Grandma’s ashes on the fireplace mantle or up in the attic alongside the antique paintings is another problematic practice that can easily end up downplaying or denying her human dignity, tempting us to treat her mortal remains as just another item to be moved around among our various trinkets.

It can be helpful to encourage the family, and all who are involved with cremains, to think about ashes in a manner similar to how we’d think about a full body. Would we keep a casket and corpse at home for a few weeks? If not, then we shouldn’t do the same with someone’s ashes. Regrettably, many people are not thinking about cremains as the revered remnants of a fellow human being, but more as something to be disposed of whenever it’s convenient for our schedule and budget. We don’t approach full-body caskets that way because we recognize more clearly the duty to bury our beloved dead. The sacred memory of our departed family and friends, in sum, calls us to carefully attend to their remains with authentic and objective gestures of respect.

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