

Why does the Church prefer full body burial?

BY DAMIAN LENSHEK

For the Catholic Herald

I have been director of cemeteries for the Diocese of Madison for less than a year, and one of the most striking things I have discovered is the wisdom of the Church's preference for full body burial.

To begin with, the Church is surprisingly emphatic in this preference.

When Pope St. Paul VI relaxed the long-standing prohibition of cremation in 1963, there was great concern that "the Church's ad-

verse attitude toward cremation" be evident and that "all necessary measures must be taken to preserve the practice of reverently burying the faithful departed."

Reasons for a full body burial

As recently as 2016, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith reaffirmed that "the Church continues to prefer the practice of burying the bodies of the deceased."

This teaching is good for at least three reasons.

First, burying rather than

cremating expresses most fully our faith in the resurrection of the body.

Burying the intact body of a Christian recalls the burial of Jesus after the crucifixion.

St. Augustine notes that the Gospel praises "those who took Christ's body from the cross and carefully and with reverent honor saw it wrapped and laid in the tomb."

The care we take with the bodies of our beloved departed not only expresses but also strengthens our faith in the Resurrection.

Second, burying the bodies of the deceased shows the most respect for these remains.

Sadly, of those cremated, more than half are never laid to rest in a cemetery.

Too many cremated remains are kept at home, scattered, or divided up among family members — practices specifically prohibited by the Church.

And many are simply left at the crematorium, perhaps because of indecision or unfamiliarity with Catholic practice.

Finally, full body burial

helps families and friends grieve their loss more effectively.

The three-stage liturgy that the Church has developed — the vigil, the funeral Mass, and the Rite of Committal — conveys the most comfort when the body is present, and when held in quick succession.

The Church earnestly recommends that the body be present for the vigil and the funeral Mass, followed by cremation if chosen, followed quickly by the committal.

The urgency that attends burying a body assists the grieving family more than the often drawn-out process of deciding what to do with a loved one's cremated remains.

To be clear, cremation is not prohibited, unless it is chosen for reasons contrary to Christian doctrine.

But the Church in her charity and wisdom strongly encourages and recommends burial.

Church positions on burial options

Let me briefly mention the many new ways of disposing

of the remains of the departed.

There are now processes for turning bodies into compost or jewelry, or dissolving them.

These are not Catholic practices since they do not evince faith in the resurrection, they do not adequately respect the dignity of the baptized, and they tend to elevate sentimental or environmental concerns above religious commitments.

For Catholics who are mindful of the environmental impact of their death, green burial provides a faithful option.

Neither Church nor state require embalming.

A casket is not required, and Catholic cemeteries can accommodate those who wish to be buried in direct contact with the earth.

The Church claims to be "an expert on humanity," and this can be seen in her strong preference for the burial of the faithful departed.

The family service advisors at our diocesan cemeteries have helped hundreds of families and are available for consultation by appointment.

Call the office of the diocesan cemetery near you for more information.

Damian Lenshek is the director of cemeteries for the Diocese of Madison.

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