



# Humanum

Issues in Family, Culture & Science

## Issue 4

# Reverence for the Body: A Witness

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When I think of contemporary evangelization, I think of FOCUS missionaries, I think of Dominicans; and I think of Geoff Quinn, my college roommate and best man at my wedding. After graduating from Williams College and an ill-advised stint as an investment banker and consultant, Geoff became a missionary. He traveled to Myanmar to preach to the animists, and then traveled home to preach in the secular North East. I don't know how it went with the animists, but it didn't always go all that well here at home. During one of Geoff's more memorable attempts to evangelize one of our mostly secular, but definitely Jewish friends, at the outset of a five-hour car ride from Boston to New York City, I thought: This is not going to work. And then I thought to myself that I wasn't even trying.

So I did eventually try, and in trying, I immediately gravitated towards the easiest way to evangelize. I gave money to others to evangelize. And, to be very frank, that is the vast majority of my involvement in what might be loosely called "The New Evangelization" until I met Cecilia and we had a family.

What I found is that in the context of family life, even I could figure out how to evangelize. All the small talk of life—like to which school are you sending your kids? Or, better yet, how many kids are you going to have?—logically leads to questions of faith and conversations about God. And the more secular the environment, the more curiosity the family inspires.

But what surprised me the most about family life is that the person who was really evangelized by my wife and children *was me*. The Church teaches that marriage is an ecclesial order that can perfect us in holiness. To be honest, as a young man I missed that teaching: and I don't think I'm the only one. I have yet to have a conversation with a twenty-something-year-old guy considering marrying a girl who gives as one of his reasons for wanting to marry her that the

institution of marriage will help perfect him in holiness. Nevertheless, the crucible of family life will help convert him, just as it has helped convert me. Independent of our intentions, what we *physically* do with our lives, shapes who we are, what we believe and the intensity with which we believe it. If you do the right thing, for not quite the right reason, your action may still have a surprisingly positive effect on you.

This, I think, is not too controversial. What is controversial is when the Church becomes specific about what She means by marriage. Here I'm thinking of Saint Paul VI's admonition that if we artificially sterilize our marriages, we are not just sterilizing our bodies; but we risk sterilizing the sacrament of marriage more generally as well as the role of the family in the New Evangelization. It is to this logic in particular that such a broad swath of Catholics objected. *Humane vitae* was deemed unacceptable because it made clear that, regardless of why we contracepted, the practice itself shaped what we individually and society more broadly believe about family, marriage, and God. What we wanted to hear instead is that we could contracept: just not for the wrong reasons. We wanted to be trusted to separate our faith from our practice, and, as we all know, we collectively effected this separation, despite the Church's teaching. Worse still, even though the past fifty years clearly demonstrate that we were wrong, and the Church was right, we persist in our error.

To be fair to the laity, with the notable exception of Saint John Paul II, the Church has not been eager to advance Her teaching on human sexuality. And, it is no great mystery why.

Church teaching about sex can repel as well as attract people. When a college friend of mine informed me that she was going to pursue a commercial conception, I made the best case I could, and I lost a friend. When a high school buddy stopped by New York with his wife on their way to interview a surrogate in Texas, I tried my best to change their mind: I lost a friend and really upset his wife.

The Church's hesitancy to bring up such difficult teachings is understandable. But, this hesitancy fails to recognize the fundamental link between our current crisis of faith and our failure to form families. While we are all deeply concerned about the Church, we should be equally concerned about marriage. Consider this: Half of all Americans conceived this year will begin life with an unmarried mother. Because abortion disproportionately affects the children of the unmarried, that number at birth is 40%.<sup>[1]</sup> Given that awful starting point, the good news, to quote Scott Hahn's recent book, *The First Society*, is that: "If Catholics would simply live the Sacrament of Matrimony for one generation, we would witness a transformation of society and have a Christian culture."<sup>[2]</sup>

We, of course, should not be surprised that Church teaching entailing such physical specificity would prove a particular challenge for us. When Jesus taught that what God has joined no man shall separate, the disciples' response was: "If this is the situation between a husband and wife, it is better not to marry" (Mt 19:10). And, upon hearing Jesus' discourse on his own Body and Blood, many disciples said, "This teaching is difficult; who can accept it?" (Jn 6:60). With respect to the physical resurrection of the body, according to Saint Augustine: "On no point, does the Christian faith encounter more opposition."<sup>[3]</sup>

The Church's very specific *teachings* about our bodies, which are at the core of our faith, have always been difficult for us to accept.

But in recent years, as these teachings have come under sustained attack, we, the lay faithful, have seriously faltered in our practice. Over the past fifty years, American Catholics have fully participated in the collapse of the family, shown an insufficient reverence for the True Presence, and passively gone along with the dramatic spike in cremation rates.[4]

We are struggling with the very physical practices of our faith as they have come under assault by a false ideology best described as Gnosticism. Let me sum up the moment this way: By the time the government has decided that guys who claim to be girls should have access to the girls' locker room because they are really girls, you can be pretty certain that the gnostic heresy is well advanced. We, the co-conspirators in the New Evangelization, are kidding ourselves if we think that we can boldly proclaim what we believe and sidestep the dominant heresy of our time. But, we must not give into despair at this very dramatic moment in the history of the Universal Church. Despite our many internal divisions, we should take great solace in the unity of belief our Church actively shows in the Eucharist.

Second, while the culture war, or "uncivil war" as it has aptly been called, strongly discourages us from making the case for the Church's teaching on sex and marriage in the public square, we must nevertheless publicly affirm what we believe.

And, finally—a point on which I want to focus particularly—we must restore a uniform burial practice that better reflects our belief in the resurrection of the body. We Catholics confess the truth of the resurrection of the body, yet we treat the rapid change in our burial practices as if it were totally tangential to our faith. That cremations rates in America have gone from 5% to 50% since the early sixties [5] and that Catholic burial practices are broadly indistinguishable from the rest of society strikes many as a non-issue.[6]

In fact, when I raise this point with the other Catholics, I typically get two responses. The first response is that there are many important things to focus on and this is not one of them, followed by a visceral emotional response that totally contradicts their first point.

Now, I'm not claiming that our society is organized around an unconscious effort to deny and transcend death, as the sociologist Ernest Becker claimed.[7] I'm only making the modest points that our reflections about death have a profound effect on what we believe and how we behave. Our physical burial practice not only reflects, but also informs our belief about death. This is particularly true in a society like ours in which death is increasingly hidden from view and rarely discussed in public.

All of which brings me to a less well-known instruction formalized during Saint Paul VI's papacy that is the opposite, in many respects, of *Humanae vitae: Piam et constantem*. Just as the first taught that what we did with our bodies mattered regardless of why we did it, the second conceded the opposite with respect to burial practice. To be clear, *Piam et constantem* was not so much a change in Church teaching as a relaxation that allowed Catholics to be cremated so long as we did not choose cremation as a way of rejecting Church teaching. To quote: "The procedure is clearly being advocated today, not out of hatred of the Church or Christian

customs, but rather for reasons of health, economics, or other reasons involving private or public order.” [8]

While not endorsing the practice of cremation, the Church made the important concession that practice and belief could be kept separated so long as the practice was not animated by a theological disagreement with the Church. Thus, for practical reasons, the Church created a great space between Her teaching about the body when it came to passing life on to the next generation and when it came to passing on to the next life. With the passage of time, this exception has sterilized our burial practice in much the same way as our attachment to artificial contraception has sterilized our marriages.

The Church’s equivocation on the point of burial is particularly regrettable given the aggressive Gnostic challenge we face today. The way we treat our bodies in both marriage and death are the two fundamental ways in which we physically reject the Gnostic heresy. The one flesh that God unites in marriage has clearly been the cultural focal point of the Gnostic heresy, but the unity of body and soul in our life eternal is the most explicit possible rejection of the very core of Gnosticism.

Moreover, it is no coincidence that the two practices have gone hand in hand since the earliest days of the Church. The Corinthians famously struggled with both, and Saint Paul forcefully rebuked them on both counts. But, he made the strongest theological point when it came not to marriage, but to the resurrection of the body. To quote his first letter to the Corinthians: “For if the dead are not raised, neither has Christ been raised, and if Christ has not been raised, your faith is in vain” (1 Cor 15:13–14).

Interestingly, our law also connects the body in marriage and in death. In 2015, when we redefined marriage from the unitive sacrament that God created to a legal recognition of a romantic partnership, we did it by allowing a physical claim on the dead. That is the setup the Human Rights Campaign used in the Obergefell case: the husband claimed the dead body of his “spouse,” though their “marriage” was not recognized in the state in which they lived. So, in a very literal sense, we allowed possession of the body in death to destroy the legal definition of marriage. Destroying marriage is a direct attack on the Church but doing so with a physical claim on the body in death reveals literally what the devil is after.

The Church’s exception with respect to cremation thus strikes me as ripe for debate, because the Church appears not to have anticipated the situation in which we find ourselves today. To quote **Patricia Snow**, “many who cremate do in fact hold positions that are contrary to Church teaching on the resurrection of the body, but without realizing it.” There is good reason to believe that a confident reaffirmation of the Church’s teaching against cremation would result in an actual change in Catholic burial practice. If there is any aspect of our faith on which the Church has unique credibility, it is resurrection of the body.

I realize that a confident reaffirmation of Church teaching would be anything but abstract. For me personally, this possibility makes me think again of my old college roommate and best man at my wedding. After a lengthy battle with brain cancer, Geoff died in 2013. A baptized Catholic, he had left the Church as an adult to become an evangelical. Not only was I unable to convince him to come back to the Catholic Church before he died, I didn’t even try: and he didn’t ask. I didn’t have the words to make the case and the Church didn’t have a sufficiently distinct

funerary practice to inspire his curiosity. What I needed in that moment is what we as a Church need today: a uniformity of practice in death that better reflects our collective belief that the whole of man is immortal, that there is a continuity between the body that dies and the body that is raised. That **this mystery** is not just something we say we believe, but something we act on.

If we Catholics collectively adopted this sign of contradiction in a society that desperately holds on to life as if though there was no other and increasingly attempts to assert control over the body in death, I am confident that we would generate an overflowing curiosity about our faith in service of the New Evangelization.

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[1] National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS) Data Brief Number 136, published December 2013, Figure 5, and accompanying data tables. Research done by the Chiaroscuro Foundation, based on NCHS estimates of the birth rate and abortion rate to married and unmarried women of reproductive age. Estimates currently only available through 2009.

[2] Scott Hahn, quoting Fr. Donald J. Keefe, *The First Society* (2017), p. xiv.

[3] Patricia Snow, "The Body and Christian Burial: The Question of Cremation," *Communio: International Catholic Review* 39.3 (Fall 2012).

[4] National Funeral Directors Association, *NFDA Cremation and Burial Report: Research, Statistics and Projections* & Cremationpedia, *Cremation Association of North America*.

[5] David Sloane, *Is the Cemetery Dead?* (2018).

[6] National Funeral Directors Association, *NFDA Cremation and Burial Report: Research, Statistics and Projections* & Cremationpedia, *Cremation Association of North America*.

[7] Ernest Becker, *The Denial of Death* (1973).

[8] *Piam et constantem*, 3366.