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Burning the Body

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I.

Every year a growing number of American Catholics choose cremation either for themselves after they die, or for a deceased relative. The numbers vary by diocese, but the overall trend is clear. Some of these Catholics choose cremation for financial reasons. Some cite “ecology,” persuaded that the world is better off without human remains. Many, innocent of conscious heresy but influenced by Eastern religion, insist that the body is disposable, a shell, nothing at all. My physical therapist, after burying her father, decided that after her own death she did not want her children burdened with the responsibility of tending her grave. “Why not?” I asked, thinking of the Church’s immemorial emphasis on corporal works of mercy. But whatever rebuttals one offers to whatever reasons these proponents of cremation give, they have a trump card that they play in the end: “Well, the Church approves of cremation.”

Does the Catholic Church “approve” of cremation? The short answer to the question is, no. For more than half a century the Church has *permitted* cremation, but her permission has stopped well short of what is meant by the word approval. Why then, where cremation is concerned, do so many Catholics today take for granted the Church’s approbation?

The confusion can be traced back to *Piam et Constantem*,^[1] the 1963 instruction from the Holy Office that first qualified the Church’s long-standing canonical ban on cremation. This watershed document was strangely ambiguous in its teaching and recommendations. On the one hand, it strongly affirmed the Church’s reverent and unbroken (*piam et constantem*) tradition of burying the faithful dead and insisted that “all necessary measures” be taken to preserve the practice. But, on the other hand, it dispensed what amounted to a universal permission slip to cremate, in part to avoid the bureaucratic nightmare of having to adjudicate individual cases. When speaking generally about cremation, *Piam et Constantem* used language that was guarded and censorious: “The devout attitude of the faithful ... must be kept from being harmed and the Church’s adverse attitude toward cremation must be clearly evident.” But when delineating grounds for exemptions from the norm of burial, the language of the instruction was so vague it might have been used to justify anything. *Piam et Constantem* permitted cremation for reasons of “health” and “economics,” and in situations involving “difficulties arising from contemporary circumstances” or from “other pressures.” Anyone familiar with the way the phrase “the health of the mother” functions in the abortion debate, understands that vague generalizations end in unrestricted access.

Piam et Constantem was also the product of a particular time and place. In its very first paragraph it invoked the specter of Masonic hostility, an enmity that in the recent past had wielded cremation as a weapon in a widespread campaign to undermine belief in the resurrection. Still clearly troubled by this enmity, but also relieved that it seemed to have abated, *Piam et Constantem* ruminated uncertainly about cremation itself; noted that it wasn’t intrinsically evil and didn’t prevent God from restoring the body; observed that there had been a “change for the better” since a time when secret societies waged

open war on the Church; and ended by deciding that the Church's traditional sanctions against people who cremate "no longer have universal, binding force, but only in those cases in which it is clear that the reason for choosing cremation was either a denial of Christian dogmas, the animosity of a secret society, or hatred of the Catholic religion and the Church." One particular danger was identified by *Piam et Constantem*, in other words. One enemy—the devil the Church knew—was warned off. Confident in its discernment, the instruction ended by placing no burden whatsoever on the individual Catholic who wished to cremate. His circumstances did not need to be exceptional; they could be perfectly ordinary. So long as he was not an inflammatory atheist, a militant Mason, or a dissenter from Church teaching—and the working assumption was that he was none of these—he could cremate.

In 1983, the revised Code of Canon Law summarized *Piam et Constantem*'s dissonant conclusions in bold type:

The Church earnestly recommends that the pious custom of burial be retained; it does not however forbid cremation, unless it is chosen for reasons which are contrary to Church teaching.[2]

Eleven years later, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* dropped the first half of this uncomfortable formula. Paragraph 2301 of the Catechism says simply, "The Church permits cremation, provided that it does not demonstrate a denial of faith in the resurrection of the body," a shift in emphasis that resulted in a gusher of unexceptional, uncontested cremations.

For a time, in the aftermath of *Piam et Constantem*, the Church held the line against allowing cremated remains at a funeral Mass. The body that John Paul II called the primordial sacrament was revered at every funeral. But soon enough, in 1997, the American Church requested and received from Rome an indult similar to the indult that allows American Catholics to receive communion in the hand, permitting the full celebration of the Funeral Mass in the presence of what are called cremains.

From that point, it was a small step to Catholics concluding that scattering their ashes was also acceptable. Individual bishops periodically denied this, but no one was listening. One thing led to another, and in the absence of clear teaching, any prohibition began to seem arbitrary. When John Kennedy Jr. died in 1999 and his ashes were scattered by his family over the waters off Martha's Vineyard (the same waters out of which his body had been recovered with great difficulty), a Catholic chaplain presided and the Church said nothing. Should we be surprised that a growing number of Catholics began deciding to dispense with a funeral altogether?

Finally, in 2016, on the same weekend that a gentleman in New York City emptied a box of a friend's ashes in the orchestra pit of the Metropolitan Opera, the Church issued *Ad resurgendum cum Christo*,[3] a new document that explicitly forbade scattering cremains, making them into jewelry, dividing them among family members, and sequestering them in private homes. Closing an important loophole, the instruction asserted that a family's choice for cremation "must never violate the explicitly-stated or the reasonably inferable wishes of the deceased faithful," and, stressing the importance of public cemeteries, reminded the faithful of their communal responsibility to remember and pray for the dead. Most fundamentally, *Ad resurgendum cum Christo* re-presented the Church's faith in the resurrection of the body, and the theological and pastoral reasons she "insistently recommends" the practice of burial over the practice of cremation.

But while the new instruction made clear the connection between bodily burial and faith in the resurrection—"burial is above all the most fitting way to express faith and hope in the resurrection of the body"—it failed to clarify a corresponding connection between the practice of cremation and a *loss* of faith in the resurrection. The fact that, as cremation has increased, "new ideas contrary to the

Church's faith have also become widespread," is treated by the instruction as if it might simply be a coincidence rather than a case of cause and effect.

Meanwhile, as every parent knows, catechesis goes forward as effectively by example as by instruction, and the widespread example of cremation has been burning in its lessons for years. Cremation may not be an intrinsically evil act, but where the life of the faithful is concerned, it has proved a dangerously misleading one. Barely a quarter of Americans now believe that they will have a body in heaven. Nearly a quarter of self-identified Christians subscribe to the Hindu doctrine of reincarnation.

In hindsight, knowing what we now know, we can propose that the Holy Office of the Catholic Church at the time of *Piam et Constantem* failed to anticipate the challenges the Church would face in the future. It failed to imagine, for example, the inroads that Eastern spirituality would make in the pews, or the damage that might be done to the faith by the financially prudent decisions of well-meaning Catholics. Specifically, when the Holy Office decided that cremation was permissible so long as it was not chosen for reasons contrary to Church teaching, it failed to foresee that *cremation itself would become a teaching* more powerful than any official document or isolated objection. If Christ's Resurrection is the great countersign to death, cremation is a contemporary countersign to resurrection. Under the influence of this sign, the catechetical power of which the Church continues to underestimate, many Catholics today do in fact hold positions that are contrary to Church teaching on the resurrection of the body, but without realizing it.

II.

When Christians profess that Jesus Christ rose from the dead in his human body, they show themselves the true heirs of the bodily religion of Judaism. Belief in Christ's physical Resurrection is the defining dogma of Christianity, its elementary teaching and essential kerygma, the kernel from which everything else flows. The first Christians, in Madeleine Delbr el's words, went out into the world of their time:

. . . not to proclaim in the first place and loudest the universal love that Jesus taught them, the justice for the little ones [and] for the weak and the oppressed . . . but to proclaim first and loudest that Jesus Christ, the man who was our friend . . . who was spat upon, mocked, struck, and scourged, who was tortured amidst laughter [and] hung upon a cross, who was bled dry, who let out his last breath with a moan, who froze upon the cross [and] who no one doubted was dead . . . *this Jesus Christ is risen.*[4]

Mystically, the Catholic Church was born from the pierced side of the crucified Christ. Historically, it was nourished by the cross-fertilization of Jewish and Greek thought, the providential encounter between Judaism's emphasis on man's bodily existence and Greek reflections on the immortality of the soul. But in the synthesis that was effected when the whole Christ rose from the dead, it was the supernatural affirmation of the body that was definitively new, and that separated the Judeo-Christian tradition once and for all from the purely spiritual religions of the East. In the aftermath of Christ's Resurrection, the body, so to speak, came into its own. In Romano Guardini's words, "[t]he Resurrection and Transfiguration are necessary to the full understanding of what the human body really is." [5]

To believe in the immortality of the immaterial soul is not so very difficult for man in any age. But to believe that the body, evidently subject to decay, is also destined for immortality, is harder. Yet this is the foundational insight of Christianity: that there is a mysterious but real continuity between the body that dies and the body that is raised, even as the tomb of Jesus was empty and his wounded, recognizable body at large. Taught by Christ's Transfiguration, Resurrection, and bodily Ascension, Christianity insisted from the beginning that man, too, is a unity, a body and a soul that together constitute him as a person and make him eternally who he is. Not only man's spirit but his flesh is

destined for eternal communion with God. And as this revolutionary message was spread abroad and believed, what followed was nothing less than Western civilization as we understand it, with its solicitude for the whole human being, his inviolable integrity, and his human rights.

From the primary gospel of the Resurrection, in other words, the secondary gospel flowed: morality of every kind that touches on the human person. Everything that Jesus taught that Western modernity approves—consideration for the neighbor and the child, the marginal and the oppressed—and everything he taught that modernity resists—the importance of sexual purity, for example, as something inseparable from spiritual health—follows, eventually if not immediately, from the revelation of the Resurrection.

If the whole man is immortal, a comprehensive morality follows. If religion is simply spiritual—if the body is a temporary expedient and only the soul perdures—ultimately, everything may be permitted. In Martha Beck's popular memoir, *Expecting Adam*, in which Beck describes her conversion to a metaphysical view of reality, she offers this critique of people who call themselves pro-life:

I always found the ideas of this far-right group damned peculiar. They were invariably religious folks, with a devout belief in the life of the Spirit. Nothing wrong with that. I myself had suspended my disbelief in a spiritual realm and was stumbling daily over evidence that my world was full of things rationalist science could not explain. But this made me feel better, not worse, about the fate of those who die young . . . Why should people who believe that life exists outside of mortal bounds be the very same people who are so obsessed with a fetus's "right to life" on this messy little planet . . . ?[6]

The answer is that Christians do not believe only in the life of the spirit. Christianity has never been a "spiritual" religion—a category Saint Paul dismisses as philosophy or worldly religion. The heart of Christianity is the God-Man, Jesus Christ, and the experience Christianity holds out and the denouement toward which it tends is a marriage of flesh and spirit, heaven and earth, God and the human race.

For centuries, this unified Christian vision was most fully articulated in the Catholic Church. What God had put together, the Catholic Church did not separate. From top to bottom—in ecclesial practice as much as in doctrine—Catholicism was a religion of incarnation, holding together in her sacramental economy the worlds of matter and spirit, and underscoring, in her uninterrupted conversation with the dead, the unity of all creation. When Franz Rosenzweig, the Jewish theologian, argued that without the historical persistence of Judaism, Christianity would drift into Gnosticism ("Whether Christ is more than an idea—no Christian can know it"[7]), he undersold the physical vitality of the Church that followed firmly in the bodily footprint of Judaism. Indeed, for a Protestant coming into the Church as a convert, there was nothing so immediately challenging as the confident physicality of the Church's life, her comfort with the body, and her domestication of death.

In traditional Catholic cultures, the dead body was everywhere. There was Jesus' body, crucified on the cross. There were the bodies of the saints, literally entombed in the local churches. And there were the bodies of ordinary Catholics, laid out in open caskets at wakes and funerals. At every Catholic funeral, there was a corpse in front of the altar, a corpse that was incensed and commended to God, accompanied to the cemetery and buried in consecrated ground, in real estate that had been set aside, in perpetuity, for God's purposes alone. In this milieu, no Catholic would have dreamed of disposing of the body according to his own ideas. Far less would he have prematurely destroyed it, or cast it away. The body was God's, and was given back to God, to do with what he promised. How he would do what he promised—how the seed would bear fruit and the perishable be raised imperishable—was a mystery also left in God's hands. Like the farmer in Mark's parable who sows a seed without

understanding how it will grow (4:26–27), the Church buried the body and waited on God. Mindful of what Sofia Cavalletti called the fundamental law of life, revealed in nature—the truth that in every death there is the seed of a resurrection[8]—Catholics stood before the mystery of death in an attitude of docility and obedience, patience and faithful hope.

As it happened, some of the dead that the Church laid to rest in this patient confidence did not decay. Fragrant and inexplicably intact, the incorrupt body of the saint vindicated and perpetuated the Church's original attitude to the body. Moreover, the incorrupt body testified to the core Christian conviction that for the believer, in a mysterious but real sense, eternity has already begun. Even here, even now, the Kingdom is already in force, and not even death can entirely undo the effects of the underlying synthesis of body and soul, not even when that synthesis is temporarily suspended. Far from being something fearsome and abhorred, the dead body in the life of the Church became a source of comfort and blessing; a compelling object of pilgrimage; an occasion of healings and miracles. Even as Christ himself took death up into his divine life and broke its power, so the Church, by absorbing death into her ongoing life, removed its sting.

In this way, Catholicism achieved a true synthesis, as opposed to the kind of internally incoherent syncretism that follows when Christianity and Eastern religion merge. This is true inclusiveness: the corpse at the party, the sharing of the earth with the dead. In this way dualism was overcome, along with the convert's initial uneasiness, and mankind's most debilitating, deeply rooted fear. If the author of the Letter to the Hebrews is correct that it is not death itself so much as the fear of death that is the key to man's bondage (2:15), then the Church's tranquil equanimity in the presence of the dead body was a proof of her claims, and evidence of her divine issue. By throwing nothing away, the Church showed herself to be the Bride of the one who vowed he would lose *nothing* of all that the Father had given him, but raise it up on the last day.

Now this synthesis is in danger of breaking up, and Catholicism's achievement is under siege, as the spirit of the antichrist—the spirit that denies that God has come in the flesh—gains ground. If God has not come in the flesh, then the flesh can be thrown away. If the flesh can be thrown away, then God has not come in the flesh. The attack can come from either direction, but the goal is the same: uncreation. If the crown of the Creator's work is the breathing of his own spirit into dust, then the goal of God's enemies will always be the pulling apart of these two. This is the very definition of death, a work of unfastening and separating that only the Incarnation, Passion, Resurrection, and physical Ascension of Jesus Christ finally overcome.

Hostility to Christian claims is not new. What is new is the growing rejection of the dead body by members of the Catholic Church, and an impulse to destroy the dead body at warp speed. Multiculturalism alone cannot account for this shift. Exposure to Eastern traditions may be a *precondition* for what has happened, but it is not an adequate explanation. Where faith and formation are sound, even a minority religion should be able to hold its own in the current cultural situation, even as Judaism and early Christianity established their bodily traditions in a pagan milieu. Nor can financial considerations, by themselves, account for the change. There have always been individuals who object to the cost of a coffin or a funeral, beginning with Judas, who begrudged Jesus the price of the vial of nard. But the idea that the dead body and money need have nothing to do with each other is a *symptom* of a gnostic outlook, rather than an explanation of gnosticism's appeal. Certainly the Church should do everything in its power to make traditional burial affordable, by waking bodies in churches, for example, and building nonprofit, cooperative mortuaries. But meanwhile people pay for what they value—witness the soaring cost of an American wedding—and the dead body has been drastically discounted in the West. Cremation is not only acceptable but attractive to many of our contemporaries.

Increasing numbers of Catholics not only cremate, they cannot wait to cremate, not even until after the funeral.

Ultimately, cremation has to be understood as expressive of modernity itself. In the past, development and decay were organic, natural processes, and ordinary time was the medium of both. Obedience was not simply an evangelical counsel with a specific meaning for professed religious; it was a general disposition held in esteem by the faithful laity, who submitted themselves, not to a religious superior, but to God's Providence unfolding in the events of their lives. If the devil is said to be in a hurry, the Church has traditionally taken the long view, showing herself patient not only with death but with life itself—with its difficulties and disappointments, its endless vicissitudes and general messiness—the sum total of which the Church has regarded as indispensable to man's spiritual growth, as the path, scenery, and script of his sanctification.

But as man has grown steadily more adept at altering his circumstances, Catholicism's patient, cruciform attitude to life has fallen out of favor. The more successful man's initiatives have been, the less patient he has become, not only with ordinary challenges like preparing a meal or getting from place to place, but with the slow, painful, unpredictable rhythms of birth and death. Increasingly, man has shown himself unable to wait: for labor to begin, or the body to die. The temptation is then to bypass nature altogether, with pitocin, elective caesareans, euthanasia. What begins as a materialist enterprise moves in an increasingly disembodied direction. The more our technology advances, the more it tends toward abstraction, stripping away not only nature, in whose perennial cycles the resurrection is inscribed, but man's embodied, natural life. In the world that ever-advancing technology ushers in, man is no longer a body and a soul, grounded in a physical creation, but a divided, projected, and manipulated image in cyberspace, which is to say, in no space. Seduced by illusions of control, man begins to prefer "virtual" reality to reality itself, an orchestrated image to dense, intractable human beings. The indignities of life can be glossed over on the internet, its messiness hidden away, at least until death in a single stroke exposes the whole enterprise as an illusion.

The terrifying, implacable truth of man's condition—that his only hope is in God—is revealed in death. For people accustomed to editing their appearances and managing their public relations, the revelation is unbearable, and the idea of their stricken, mortified body on public view at a wake or funeral is insupportable. Cremation, in this view, asserts a kind of negative control precisely where control has been lost. If death reveals man's defeat, cremation destroys the evidence. It eliminates the alarming dead weight of the body; it bypasses the tedious, unsettling process of decay. What is left is a small, portable box or jar: a symbol, or Urbody, rather than the body itself.

Thus does cremation proceed not only from the East but from the West: from England, for example, where in 1857 two brothers named Siemens invented a furnace that maximized the use of heat in industry.[9] The East with its spiritual bias and the West with its material bias end in the same place. Cremation is not only imported but homegrown, an end-product of Western industrialism and materialism.

III.

And after the body has been cremated and the ashes dispersed, what then? If you ask this of ordinary Catholics who favor cremation, their belated, faintly ironic response is, "Well, God can put the body back together!" For the person of faith, God's omnipotence is not in dispute. What is in doubt is man's response, whether he chooses to align himself with God or test God's power. In the Gospel of Luke, when Satan tempts Jesus a third time, he carries him to the pinnacle of the Temple in Jerusalem and

says, "If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down, for it is written, 'He will give his angels charge over you,' and 'on their hands they will bear you up.'" To which Jesus responds, "You shall not tempt the Lord your God" (4:9-11).

Tempting, or testing, God is the sin of the Israelites in the desert, where, in their furious terror that they have been led into the desert to die, they demand proofs of God, "though they had seen [His] works" (Ps 95:9). In the deserts of modern life, it is man's indifference that tests God. Whereas Israel, in a frenzy to preserve its physical life, engaged in open battle with God, the temperature of modern man's relationship to God is decidedly cooler. He cremates with a shrug, offering a rationalization only when pressed. He is not so much challenging God as shrugging off what is at stake, not so much defiant as passive-aggressive. The final, iconic atrocity of the Holocaust, in which the people chosen by God to give bodily life to his Son were not only murdered but reduced *en masse* to ash, this final repudiation of the body is now commonplace in the West. Conditioned by his culture, man takes the path of least resistance. Almost without thinking, he aligns himself with destruction, because the alternative is too much trouble. Too much trouble! To bear witness to the Resurrection by waking, carrying, and burying the body, and afterwards, tending its grave.

In the hierarchy of sin, sloth is an antecedent of despair, but sloth understood in a particular sense, as man's aversion or antipathy to the responsibilities that accompany his high destiny. Whereas magnanimity, or greatness of soul, is the virtue that enables man to respond to God's call, sloth, or *acedia*, is the sin that prevents him. In his spiritual inertia, man does not *want* to be chosen. He would prefer that God leave him in peace.

As time goes on, man's sense of himself and his destiny falls further. As far back as 1986, in a series of talks that were collected in a book originally titled *To Look on Christ*, Pope Benedict XVI observed:

Today there is a remarkable hatred among people for their own real greatness. Man sees himself as the enemy of life, of the balance of creation, as the great disturber of the peace of nature . . . as the creature that went wrong. His salvation and the salvation of the world would on this view consist of his disappearing.[10]

When man today cites "ecology" as his reason for choosing cremation, what sounds at first almost absurd in fact cuts to the heart of his present situation. After decades of relentless propaganda, man now agrees with his accuser that he is the scourge of creation, rather than its crown, and it would be better if he ceased to exist. Not even cremation, in his view, is environmentally acceptable. Accordingly, to broaden cremation's appeal to the environmentally concerned, a company called Matthews International is now marketing a "gentler," "biocremation" process that dissolves the dead body with chemicals.[11]

In the early days of creation, when God called fallen man to Himself, man, in his chagrin, tried to blend back into nature, by hiding under the skins of animals and the shade of trees. Now, in these last days, he aims to disappear altogether. His goal is the perfect crime: to destroy without a trace the body that is the seed of his resurrected body. What began in the Garden as a desire to be quit of God, ends in self-hatred and self-negation. What God created, man scatters, *like chaff that the wind blows away*.

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[1] AAS 56 (1964), 822-23.

[2] *Code of Canon Law*, no. 1176.

- [3] Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Ad resurgendum cum Christo*, August 15, 2016.
- [4] Madeleine Delbr el, *We, the Ordinary People of the Streets* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), 186–87. Emphasis original.
- [5] Romano Guardini, *The Lord* (Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1954), 411.
- [6] Martha Beck, *Expecting Adam: A True Story of Birth, Rebirth, and Everyday Magic* (New York: Random House, 2011), 250.
- [7] Franz Rosenzweig, *The Star of Redemption*, trans. William Hallo (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1970), 415.
- [8] Sofia Cavalletti, *The Religious Potential of the Child*, trans. Patricia M. and Julie M. Coulter (Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 1992), 176.
- [9] Simone Ameskamp recounts the role played by the Siemens brothers in the development of modern cremation in “Fanning the Flames: Cremation in Late Imperial and Weimar Germany,” in *Between Mass Death and Individual Loss: The Place of the Dead in Twentieth-Century Germany*, eds. Alon Confino, Paul Betts, and Dirk Schumann (New York: Berghahn Books, 2008).
- [10] Joseph Ratzinger, *The Yes of Jesus Christ: Spiritual Exercises in Faith, Hope, and Love* (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 1991), 74.
- [11] Kevin Sack, “In Tough Times, a Boom in Cremations as a Way to Save Money,” *New York Times*, 8 Dec 2011.

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