

Honor We Must Give the Deceased
All Souls Day Statement
Pastoral Letter
Archbishop Michael J. Sheehan
October 2010

“I believe in the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting.”
The Apostles' Creed

My Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Soon we will observe All Souls Day. Never are the truths of Christianity more consoling than when we face the mystery of death. We are able to face the end of our earthly existence without fear or despair because of Him who declared, “I am the Resurrection and the Life. The one who believes in Me shall never die.”

These great truths have always been expressed in the funeral rites of the Church, and the care we take in the burial of our dead.

However, in our own day, we see even among Catholics a misunderstanding of these great truths, resulting in an abandonment of the traditional practices of the Church. I wish to call your attention to two of these mistaken practices today.

1. From ancient times, the heart of the funeral of a Christian has been the celebration of the Eucharist for the departed, with the earthly remains of the deceased present whenever possible. This is the Mass of Christian Burial.

The primary purpose of a Catholic Funeral is to plead the mercy of God upon the soul of the departed person. It is an infallible teaching of the Church that Purgatory does exist, and that the souls there can be helped with our prayers and it is the common teaching of the Church that most of the faithful who depart this life after the age of reason will have some time of temporal punishment for their sins in Purgatory. The Mass is, of course, the most powerful prayer we can offer God, and therefore we, the living, have an obligation in charity to offer the Mass for the departed. In the Mass of Christian Burial we also thank God for the gift of salvation given by Christ to the departed, and ask that the consolations of faith be given to those who mourn. The presence of the body or remains of the departed in God's House is a final act of honor to that body which was the Temple of the Holy Spirit in this life and will be a glorified body of a saint in the resurrection on the Last Day.

To fail to provide for the Funeral Mass, substituting some sort of “memorial service”, or “celebration of life” gathering, or not providing for any funeral service at all, is gravely wrong.

The funeral of a Catholic is to be celebrated in a church, preferably the parish church of the deceased, and not in a mortuary, or any other place, with the rare exception when the pastor judges that the congregation will be too large for the church.

2. We have already spoken of the dignity of the body of a deceased Christian. In this life our bodies are living tabernacles; in eternity our bodies will share the glory of the Resurrection. Therefore, we treat the bodies of our dead as befits something sacred, for so indeed they are. I urge the use of our Catholic Cemeteries if possible and the burial of our deceased loved ones in consecrated ground. This provides a sacred place where loved ones may visit and pray.

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.

However, if the option of cremation is chosen, the obligation to entomb the remains in a consecrated place remains. This is to be done as soon after the Mass of Christian Burial as possible. Especially to be condemned are the practices of scattering the ashes, enclosing them in jewelry, dividing them among relatives as keepsakes, or doing other bizarre things with them. Such practices do not give honor to the body and, indirectly, are an affront to our belief in the resurrection of the dead. There are those who say they wish to keep the ashes at home so that they “may feel close” to their loved ones. This shows a lack of faith in the communion of saints, by which we are spiritually united to the departed, in a way far more marvelous than keeping their remains on a shelf in our house.

I would ask our pastors to often teach these truths to the faithful, and to do all in their power to see that each Catholic receives the funeral rites of the Church as they deserve as baptized Christians.

My friends, the light of the Gospel, which dispels the darkness of death, is our most precious possession. Let us not be misled by the atmosphere of paganism around us, which rejects the existence of the soul, the sacredness of the body, the mercy of the Redemption, and eternal life with God in heaven. Rather, let us render the debt of love we owe the dead in frequent prayer for their eternal rest, and let

our funeral celebrations show to the entire world that we indeed believe “in the resurrection of the dead, and the life everlasting”, won for us by the death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. Remember to pray for your deceased loved ones and friends, especially on All Souls Day.

Sincerely yours in the Risen Lord,

Most Rev. Michael J. Sheehan
Archbishop of Santa Fe