



Buried with Christ

This column is a reflection on a 2016 Vatican Instruction “regarding the burial of the deceased and the conservation of the ashes in the case of cremation.”

The first days of November mark it as the Month of the Dead. As the wealth of autumn colors yields to the bleak barrenness of winter, the feasts of All Saints and All Souls signal a change of spiritual seasons too, and raise a fresh question in an aging year. When the sun shines bright and there’s plenty to do, I catch myself asking, “Who am I becoming among the *living*?” But the fading light and shorter days of fall bring to mind a different kind of wondering: “Who am I becoming among the *dead*?”

All November long we stand before the graves of saints and sinners who’ve gone where we shall follow. Into their number our souls will be admitted the hour we breathe our last. Within their company the mortal remains of our body will reverently be placed on the day of our burial.

I imagine being buried on a spring day under blue sky and fresh green-leaves. For it was in the spring of the year that our Redeemer “died and was buried.” It was in the spring of the year that He came forth from the tomb, brightening with hope the graves of all who are “buried with Him in baptism.” For those who build their lives on His promise of Resurrection, even if our funeral falls in November, we will go to

ground spiritually in spring. For the Month of the Dead unfailingly points us back to the season when the Son of God made all things new, even as it looks ahead to the Last Day, when, in the words of the Vatican Instruction, “God will give incorruptible life to our body, transformed by reunion with our soul.”

In accord with ancient tradition, therefore, “the Church insistently recommends that the bodies of the deceased be buried in cemeteries.” For “burial is above all the most fitting way to express faith and hope in the resurrection of the body.” In her funeral liturgy the Church “commits to the earth, in hope, the seed of the body that will rise in glory.”

Thus do the burial rites of the Church publicly manifest our faith in the resurrection of the body of the deceased and our great respect for the God-given dignity of the human body to be buried—an integral part of the person’s full human identity. Proper Christian burial maintains the relationship between the living and the dead by encouraging reverent remembrance of the faithful departed, who are thereby seen to “remain part of the Church.” All of this applies to the practice of cremation as well. Although the Church prefers the practice of burying the bodies of the dead, cremation has no effect on the soul; it negates neither the soul’s immortality nor the resurrection of the body. Therefore, it is acceptable to the Church if done in a manner that expresses fitting respect for the cremated remains.

First of all, “the ashes of the faithful must be laid to rest in a . . . Cemetery” or comparable area set aside and dedicated

for burial. This “prevents the faithful departed from being forgotten, or their remains being shown a lack of respect . . . once the immediately subsequent generation has . . . passed away.”

For these same reasons, absent exceptional circumstances, “the conservation of the ashes of the departed in a domestic residence is not permitted.” Cremated remains “may not be divided among various family members” or “preserved in mementos, pieces of jewelry or other objects” or scattered in the air, sea, or land.

These norms are rooted in the death and burial of our Savior. The Gospels make clear that the disciples of Jesus took great care in laying His body in the tomb reverently and rightly. We should do no less for those whom He loved unto the end.