

BURYING THE DEAD

By Most Rev. John G. Vlazny, D.D.,
Archbishop of Portland

*(reprinted with permission from Catholic Cemetery,
January, 2010)*

A few months ago I completed my service as the Episcopal Moderator of the Catholic Cemetery Conference. The 60th Annual convention of this dedicated group of Catholic cemeterians was held in Chicago Sept. 29-Oct. 2, 2009. The theme of the conference was *"Beacons of Hope, Fields of Faith."* This theme was chosen because Catholic cemeteries continue today to serve as beacons of our Catholic belief in the hope of the resurrection and remind us all of the faith of those who have gone before us. In the name of the Church these cemeterians carry out the sacred religious function of the burial of the deceased and care for their resting places. They readily acknowledge the religious significance of the corporal works of mercy, particularly the burial of the dead. They encourage prayer for our deceased friends and relatives and promote efforts to explain our Catholic teachings and practices that relate to death, burial and reverence for the faithful departed.

At the recent conference several presentations were made about the disposition of human remains. I am sure my parents and grandparents never gave a thought to the final disposition of their own human remains in any way other than burial in a cemetery. This is no longer true.

In the year 2005 alone there were one million cremations that took place here in the U.S. in more than 2,200 crematories. We know that ancient pagans commonly torched the remains of their dead. It was belief in the resurrection and a sincere desire to ritualize their farewells in a reverent way that led to the widespread practice of Christian burial. People who promote cremation suggest that it's cost effective, environmentally more friendly, "less emotional," and even more widely acceptable than ever before. I even heard it suggested that "religious restrictions are diminishing."

It is true that the Church today allows cremation, whereas it did not look favorably on this practice in the past. Unfortunately, some misunderstandings have impacted our practice when it comes to liturgical celebrations on the occasion of death. When the celebration of a funeral liturgy takes place, it should take place with the body of the deceased present. Sometimes this is not possible and then a memorial celebration will occur later.

Bringing the cremated remains to the church is allowed, but it is truly exceptional. The ritual farewell which takes place in church honors the body which was the companion of the soul throughout life's journey. Cremation is much more akin to burial. It differs from burial in that the decomposition of the human remains is greatly accelerated. The Church opposes scattering the remains or treating them as personal mementos and insists upon their burial because of our abiding respect for the human body which is part and parcel of our human nature.

A new kind of "cremation" has been introduced in recent years described as "bio-cremation," a less complicated term for what professionals call alkaline hydrolysis. This is the process of breaking down the body through the use of heat, water, alkali and vaporization. Its promoters describe it as the green eco-logical alternative to cremation and burial-without harmful mercury emissions. As with the original form of cremation, the concern of the Church is about the ultimate disposition of the human remains. Serious questions remain about this practice and, as a result, the Church is much more hesitant in accepting this as a legitimate practice for people of faith. The system is in its infancy, tracing its history only back to 1998 at the Univ. of Florida. The practice was introduced at the Mayo Clinic of Rochester, MN, in 2005 and this year the first commercial bio-cremation installation is taking place in St. Petersburg, FL.

There is one concern that seems to drive the expansion of cremation and bio-cremation practices. It is the impact of what might be described as the human footprint on planet earth. So-called green burial practices are being promoted as a way to "help heal the planet," a kind of final gesture at the time of our death without further impeding the earth's ability to serve the needs of future generations.

Green burial is described as caring for the dead without the use of toxins and materials that are not biodegradable. Promoters suggest that in a typical green cemetery, burial density is normally 1/10 of that of a conventional cemetery. Because embalming, metal caskets, vaults and conventional markers are prohibited in green burials, they also offer cost savings. There are levels of green burial grounds under consideration - vaultless ones, those with strict limitations concerning monuments; others that are more akin to gardens and conservation burial grounds, and lastly, places that are closely monitored with restoration planning in place.

When all is said and done, Church burial practices and rituals ultimately should reflect our beliefs as Catholic Christians about death and the afterlife. Catholic cemeterians take seriously their responsibility to reflect those teachings in the practices they recommend and accept. As we pray with the deceased and for the deceased this month of November, we have yet another opportunity to remember them, pray for them, respect their dignity and revere their human remains in our cemeteries.

Yes my friends, we are grateful for the gift of life – life everlasting.