

Christian Burial Versus Cremation

By BRO. DAMIAN GOGGINS, O. P.

ENTURIES behind the times" is the popular verdict now-a-days for all Catholic customs and beliefs standing in the way of much abused "modern progress." Twentieth century standards, we are told, can and will brook no influences whose tendency is to stultify the "onward march" of civilization. But, unfortunately, not every scientific or intellectual "push" in this modern heyday of civilization is a step forward. For example, the present day cremation movement virulently aims at the complete subversion of the humane, Christian practice of burying the human body after death.

We love our bodies. Each of us quite rightly, if moderately, respects and loves his body as his first, and materially best possession. Of all things possessed or within the possibility of possession, our body is most truly and exclusively our own. Human nature is a combination of matter and spirit, of soul and body. The soul and body complete each other, concurring to form one entity—human nature. We therefore love and respect our bodies because they are an essential part of ourselves.

This natural love and respect of the body makes it difficult to explain why men, even in pagan antiquity, practiced cremation, the burning of the body after death. Though many pagans went to excess in the culture of their bodies, yet at death when the ravages of time or disease had stolen away their beauty and symmetry, pagan custom consigned these same bodies to a great funeral pyre of combustible materials; and as the consuming flames slowly rose up around the shriveling form, relatives and friends made merry round about with divers incantations. What seems even more incredible, is that many peoples considered it praiseworthy for the wife of the departed to throw herself into the flames and be consumed with her husband, believing that this singular act of heroism would bring some great good to the "shade" of her departed consort in a future life. Some Indian tribes, after cremating the corpse, went to the extreme of sprinkling the remaining ashes on the heads of the

mourners. The common pagan practice, however, was to place the carefully collected ashes in cinerary urns for preservation. From history it would seem that the Jews, Romans, and Greeks, though their customs varied periodically, usually buried their dead. At the close of the fifth century of the Christian era the practice of cremating the dead had become extinct.

In modern days, however, cremation has been revived and has recruited a large volume of supporters and devotees. It is worth while for us, therefore, to look into the motives of modern cremation and see why it does not bear the ear marks of progress. Masonic sects, who gathered at Naples in 1869, vigorously inaugurated the movement which has gradually won adherents in both Europe and America. Resurrecting this practice from its pagan grave, they have foisted it on a fad-beridden world under the specious pretense of its hygienic necessity. Maliciously disregarding the unseemliness, inhumanity, and repugnance which cremation involves for a Christianized, and therefore civilized man of the twentieth century, cremationists have centered all their forces around sanitation motives, laying at the gates of cemeteries the causes of various diseases and maladies. Increased population, and the consequent overcrowding of cities, have also been used with telling, though specious, force to warrant and substantiate the recall of cremation.

But do these conditions suffice for the overthrow of primitive, traditional Christian burial? Catholics and the vast majority of Christians are convinced that they do not; and, moreover, that the exaggerated picture of unsanitary conditions and "insurmountable difficulties" arising from the overcrowded conditions of our large cities must be denied. After admitting every particular instance of unsanitary conditions, which, bear in mind, is the result of legislative or executive neglect, and after carefully comparing the population of any densely settled metropolis with the area of available land surrounding it, these two arguments shrivel into trivialities which legislation can satisfactorily rectify. And yet cries of retrogression incessantly bellow out the alarm: "Your Christian burial is centuries behind the times; cremation is the need of the hour." But Christianity—mellowed by her age-old experience in morality—calmly, yet inexorably replies: "By your unwarranted return to this evil practice you are re-opening the flood gates of destruction for humanity; you are erecting with your own hands

the funeral pyre of your morality, your laws, your governmental unity."

But utility and sanitation are not the only motives back of the present day cremation movement, nor are they by any means the principle ones. Gross materialism and irreligion play a silent part all too little reckoned with by a great number of its sympathizers. Atheists and Indifferentists, unsympathetic with the teachings of Christ and His Church, have laid hold of the practice as a telling weapon whereby to set at naught the time-honored tradition of Christian burial. Nor is Masonic testimony to this effect wanting, it being explicitly declared by one of high rank amongst them that "our task is not confined to the mere burning of the dead, but extends to burning and destroying superstition as well."¹ From authoritative statements of this kind repeatedly urged upon Masons, there can be no doubt that the destruction of "superstitions" connected with the custom of Christian burial, rather than the custom itself, is the coveted objective of cremationists. That their misguided and irreligious motive misses the mark becomes apparent from the widely different attitude of the Catholic Church toward the burial of the body, and her scripturally sound associations and teachings pertaining to it.

The Church which Christ founded has for nearly twenty centuries held unwaveringly to her time-honored respect and reverence for the body, the temple of the immortal soul, and the recipient of God's blessings and favors. From the very moment when God deigns to bring forth the human body to the light of day; to clothe it in beauty and strength and proportion; to vivify its countenance with that spark of divine fire—the immortal soul; unto the final hour when He chooses to recall that soul to Himself, the Church takes the body into her motherly arms, pours the cleansing waters of Baptism upon it; strengthens and confirms it with her anointing oils; sends out her representatives to distant shores, to fields of battle, and to houses of death to bind up its wounds and soothe its pains; invokes the care of its Creator upon it in perils of land and sea; and, finally, wraps it in the winding sheet of sanctity and holiness and lays it away in the earth whence it came, there to await its reuniting on the last day with its companion, the soul.

¹ Gorini: "La Purificazione Dei Morti."

From the very first days of her existence she has been solicitous for its dignity and mission, and has repeatedly fulminated her anathemas against paganizing influences derogating from the respect due it as the temple of God.² Not without reason, then, has she taken her firm attitude against cremation.

The Church's code of laws leaves no room for doubt as to her traditional stand against this practice, explicitly decreeing that "the bodies of the faithful must be buried, their cremation being reprobated."³ In the second paragraph of the same canon it is further decreed that: "If any one shall in any way order the cremation of his body, this order cannot be lawfully fulfilled, and any stipulation, will, or disposition to that effect must be disregarded." Furthermore, those who command the cremation of their bodies are to be deprived of ecclesiastical burial, which consists of three distinct parts, all of which are accompanied by prayers: the transfer of the body to the church; funeral services in the church; and interment in consecrated ground.⁴ How solicitous she is for the proper burial and subsequent guardianship of her subjects can be seen from her regulations regarding cemeteries, their consecration and protection against desecration.⁵

The Church's solicitude for the body, occasions the question: why is she so solicitous for the mortal, corruptible clay, when that, after all, must perish? What difference in reality does it make whether that inevitable decomposition be allowed to take its natural course, or hurried a little by modern methods? It is objected, too, that even in the ordinary course of nature, the body becomes so intermingled with the elements of earth and air as to be beyond the possibility of unification. Plausible as these objections to the Church's adherence to burial may seem,

² An example of this is to be found in a law promulgated on February 1, 1300, by Pope Boniface VIII, against the then rising custom of boiling the bodies of the nobility, who died on foreign shores, in order to separate the flesh from the bones, thus rendering transportation to their native land more convenient. He declared it to be an abomination in the sight of God, and horrifying to the minds of the faithful, decreeing that thereafter such bodies were either to be conveyed whole and entire to the desired spot of burial, or buried at the place of death until, after the course of nature, they could be removed to their native land.

³ Codex Juris Canonici: Pars II, Tit. XII: De Sepultura Ecclesiastica, Can. 1203.

⁴ Ibid. Canons 1204 et 1240, No. 5.

⁵ Ibid. Canons 1205 sqq.

their irrelevancy becomes apparent when we consider that they all alike have reference to the ultimate end attained, namely destruction and decomposition, while the Church's attitude is concerned solely with the method whereby that end is attained.

She deems it most unbecoming that the human body, once the living temple of God, the instrument of heavenly virtues, the recipient of God's manifold blessings of health, integrity, beauty, robustness, and proportion, should finally be subjected to a method of disposal commonly associated with the waste and rubbish of earth. Realizing as she does that the material form of no other creature of earth has been so singularly blessed and raised above the dignity of earthly things as has been the body of man, the Catholic Church cannot and will not countenance its being cast into the flames after the fashion of beastly carcasses, no matter how fragrant the flowers or how divine the strains that are employed to cover up the outrage! Charitable and humane motives have ever been her guiding principles. Her valuation of the human body, avoiding the extremes of excess and defect, is not only a true conception, but a refined and Christian one.

Men value a thing either because of the internal merit of the thing itself, or because of some external quality or association enhancing the worth of it. An old chair, a loom, an article of clothing of Colonial days is useless in modern times. But let a man attempt to destroy one of these things, and his experience with the law will teach him the untold worth of heirlooms because of the invaluable associations connected with them. The lifeless body of a father, a mother, an endeared friend, a great statesman, is, indeed, useless, unornamental, and even repulsive; yet let any bereaved man who has ever witnessed the scene around a stockyard incinerator carry his dead to one of our modern crematories, and all the flowers, all the consoling music, all the poetry symbolized in the casting of the ashes "to the four winds of heaven" can never vindicate the vile disposition of his once rational beloved. Our valuation of the dead body rests on no merits which it has in itself. But because of extrinsic associations surrounding it, in deference, namely, to the fund of virtue, intellectuality, nobility, charity, and love of which it was once the instrument, it merits for a far loftier reason than the Colonial relic the tenderest treatment and the mildest disposal that lies within the power of its rational fellow creatures to give.

Another reason why the practice of cremating the body seems so unbecoming is its resurrection on the last day. Before going any further with this phase of the argument, let it be clearly understood that cremation is in contradiction with no dogma of the Catholic Church. The universal adoption of cremation as an official means of interment would in no way provoke "dogmatic backsliding," as our adversaries would have it, or "prevent any interruption of that 'sweet sleep and calm rest' which the old prayer that the earth might lie lightly has associated with the grave." That the resurrection of the body is a certain dogma of the Catholic Faith is clearly to be found in the creeds, professions of faith, and definitions of Councils dating back to the earliest days of the Church! Catholics believe, indeed, in the doctrine of the resurrection of the body, but from this it were absurd to conclude, as cremationists firmly do, that enforced cremation can reduce to ashes that "superstition," for it makes not a particle of difference, as far as the dogma of the resurrection of the body is concerned, whether the body be burned, boiled, or buried, or blasted to the four corners of the earth, since it will ultimately in any case become so intermingled with other elements as to render its unification by human power impossible. Destruction of the elements of the body, therefore, can have no bearing on the possibility of its resurrection, for, since God, Who can neither deceive nor be deceived, has revealed that it shall rise, Catholics believe that He Who created it out of diverse elements can, by that self-same power, again reunite it to the soul on the last day. Cremation, therefore, though it burn the body, can never burn the possibility of its resurrection.

The Church's objections, then, to cremation are not because of dogmatic contradictions, but based rather on moral, humanitarian, and disciplinary grounds. Modern cremationists have dragged from pagan sepulchres this wretched skeleton of an un-Christian past by harping incessantly on its hygienic necessity and utility for the forward march of twentieth century civilization! Men of today should know that the overthrow of Christian burial, an ancient institution as humane as it is befitting and worthy, is a measure about as progressive as the recent wholesale uprooting of time-honored human institutions in smoldering Russia.

Time-honored burial, on the contrary, where rightly and efficiently practiced, has for centuries been the accepted and most humane and rational method of interring the bodies of the dead, sparing the emotions of the living, and, at the same time, accomplished without detriment to health or sanitation. To these advantages might be added a juridical one that, in the course of ages, has spared the life of a great many innocent defendants and brought to justice many a silent criminal. Burial affords what cremation forever destroys: the possibility of exhuming the body for legal examination. Nor is this fact of minor importance, for frequently the legal solution of a maze of conflicting evidence rests solely on a post mortem examination.

Since cremation involves no contradiction to dogma, it is permissible and even necessary at times, and under certain conditions such as arise in times of war, plague, or pestilence, when the immediate good of the living demands it. Broad minded and far seeing in her attitude, the Catholic Church has ever at heart the best interests of humanity, upholding its rights and protecting and guiding its course along Christian and humane lines justly in keeping with its dignity. Having laid the foundations of Christian civilization, she has, for nearly twenty centuries, been the champion of all that can be an honor and a glory to it. Religious, scientific, and political foes have striven from the very beginning to wrench from her experienced hand the norm of civilization, but to no avail. Her traditional attitude towards cremation is but a single example of her all embracing efforts in the interests of humanity. Vain, indeed, is the folly that flings itself against the Rock of Peter!

STAR-PLAY

By BRO. GREGORY HEROLD, O. P

The little angel babes,
With dainty marbles bright,
Played long among the fields
Of heaven's purple night;
But when the grey-eyed Dawn
Peeked in upon the sight,
They quickly took alarm
And scampered off in flight!