



THE DIOCESE OF ROCKVILLE CENTRE

Office of Human Life, Family and Bioethics



May 2021

Highlights of this newsletter:

- ❖ May, the month of Mary
- ❖ Human dignity and the body
- ❖ A threat to human dignity: Human Composting
- ❖ Respecting human dignity: Emily's Gift
- ❖ News in our Office

Dear Friends for Life,

MAY, THE MONTH OF MARY

It is most fitting that the beautiful month of May, blooming with hope and new life, is dedicated to Our Lady, the most holy Mother of Our Savior. She is the Mother of Life! In the words of St. John Henry Newman, “For such gladness and joyousness of external Nature is a fit attendant on our devotion to her who is the Mystical Rose and the House of Gold.”¹

May also includes the Easter season where we contemplate Mary’s motherhood in a deep and personal way. Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI explains: “In the days that followed the Lord’s Resurrection, the apostles stayed together, comforted by Mary’s presence, and after the Ascension, they persevered with her in prayerful expectation of Pentecost. Our Lady was a mother and teacher to them, a role that she continues to play for Christians of all times...”² And as St. Louis de Montfort taught, we go “to Jesus through Mary.” Imbued now with the gifts of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, let us seek the motherly guidance and intercession of the Blessed Virgin Mary in a world that needs her more than ever.

HUMAN DIGNITY AND THE BODY

Last month, the dignity of the human person was highlighted in this newsletter, bringing particular attention to the distinction between the secular and Christian views on human dignity. The former describes dignity essentially as a changeable quality based on functional independence and self-determination. In contrast, the Christian perspective holds human dignity to be a quality that cannot be diminished or lost, because this true

¹ Nada Mazzei, “May: The Month of the Blessed Virgin Mary” *Catholic Stand*. April 25, 2017. <https://catholicstand.com/may-the-month-of-the-blessed-virgin-mary/> (accessed May 22, 2021).

² Mazzei: “May,” n.p.

dignity derives from the fact that we are made in the Image of God and intended for eternal communion with Him. This quality is neither measurable nor reducible; it is based on the simple attribute of *being human*.

The human person is comprised of both an immortal soul and a corruptible body which are separated at death, the end of earthly life. At the Final Judgment the soul will be reunited with the body for eternal life (or eternal punishment).³ The resurrection of the body is a tenet of our Faith which we profess every week at Mass in the Creed. It is also an affirmation of the Resurrection of Christ: “If there is no resurrection of the dead, then neither has Christ been raised. And if Christ has not been raised, then empty [too] is our preaching; empty, too, your faith.” (1 Cor 15:13-14) Through Baptism the body becomes the temple of the Holy Spirit, and integrated with the soul, it is the instrument and vessel through which the Holy Spirit can inspire and accomplish good works.⁴ And so it follows that, upon death, the depleted body from which the soul departs must be treated with utmost respect and reverence.

A THREAT TO HUMAN DIGNITY: HUMAN COMPOSTING

In the last week, A. 382⁵ and S. 5535⁶, “An act to amend the not-for-profit corporation law, in relation to the creation, operation, and duties of natural organic reduction facilities as cemetery corporations,” has gained momentum in the New York State legislature. It has passed out of committees, and is heading for full votes in the Assembly and the Senate. With less than a week remaining in the legislative session, some are hopeful that the “Human Composting bill” will pass without much fanfare. But, as Christians, we must take pause and consider what this bill does and what it says about human dignity and respect for the human corpse.

Natural Organic Reduction, (NOR) is the process of turning human remains into compost. A corpse is combined with organic materials (i.e. wood chips, straw, etc.) and microbes in a special container maintained at low heat. This mix is aerated and periodically rotated over the course of 30 days to accelerate natural decomposition. The end product is a 55 gallon drum of compost or mulch. This process is promoted as an “environmentally sustainable” and cost-effective alternative to traditional burial and cremation.⁷ It is legal in the states of Washington (2019) and, as of last month, Colorado (notably, these are states that also have legalized assisted suicide).

The New York State Catholic Conference opposes this bill and we should, too, for these reasons:

- The Church teaches “all necessary measures must be taken to preserve the practice of reverently burying the faithful departed.”⁸
- The metaphysical significance of the human body and the soul cannot be reduced to mere matter that is recycled like other non-human matter. The body is part of the identity of the human person and should be treated in a dignified way, appropriate for one made in the Image of God.

³ Catholic Church. *Catechism of the Catholic Church: With Modifications from the Editio Typica* (New York: Doubleday, 1997), 989-991,1038.

⁴ Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Instruction *Ad resurgendum cum Christo* regarding the burial of the deceased and the conservation of the ashes in the case of cremation. (August 15, 2016) §3.

⁵ [A382 | New York 2021-2022 | Relates to the creation, operation, and duties of natural organic reduction facilities as cemetery corporations | TrackBill](#)

⁶ [NY State Senate Bill S5535 \(nysenate.gov\)](#)

⁷ Molly Glick, “Now You Can compost Human Bodies Too” *Sierra*, January 27, 2021 <https://www.sierraclub.org/sierra/now-you-can-compost-human-bodies-too> (accessed May 22, 2021)

⁸ Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Ad resurgendum*, §1.

- Composting human remains denies our belief “in the resurrection of the body and life everlasting” and Christ’s victory over death.
- Burying the dead is a corporal act of mercy that is an extension of our care for the human person.
- Continued prayers offered for the soul of the deceased person are spiritual acts of mercy that reinforce the enduring (albeit changed) relationships we have with the dead (i.e. the Communion of Saints); burial and visits to the cemetery encourage our attention to this mutual intercession (which is far less likely when remains are scattered).⁹

The Catholic Church is very clear on the respect due the deceased human body. Indeed, burial is much preferred to cremation. However, cremation is allowed for “sanitary, social or economic motives” so long as cremation *not be* chosen because it is a mere “stage in the cycle of regeneration” or a fusion with the universe; serving (or giving the appearance of) some pantheist, naturalist, or nihilistic purpose; or so that ashes may be scattered or divided for keepsakes, etc.

Arguments in favor of human composting that center on ecological and economic concerns are weakened considerably when one considers that burial options which respect the dignity of the human body can be environmentally conscious (e.g. biodegradable coffins, declining the embalming process, etc.) and that funeral directors can negotiate arrangements when finances are an issue.¹⁰

TAKE ACTION AGAINST THE HUMAN COMPOSTING BILL

You can oppose this bill now by sending a message to your state senator and assemblyperson through the Catholic Action Network of the New York State Catholic Conference. Go here: [Action Center | New York State Catholic Conference \(nyscatholic.org\)](https://www.nyscatholic.org/action-center)

If you are able, I encourage you to call their offices in addition to the written message.

RESPECTING HUMAN DIGNITY: EMILY’S GIFT

In stark contrast to the Human Composting bill, Emily’s Gift is a program offered through Catholic Health that honors and respects the human remains of pregnancy loss. The Church teaches, “The corpses of human embryos and fetuses...must be respected just as the remains of other human beings.”¹¹ Although New York state law allows for the human remains of young fetuses or embryos to be disposed as medical waste, through the Emily’s Gift program parents are supported emotionally and spiritually during a difficult time and their children will be buried with proper reverence. Please see the newsletter article by Deacon Rich Becker and testimony by the Hutchinsons at the biannual burial ceremony held earlier this month.

NEWS IN OUR OFFICE

⁹ John Horvat II, “Human Composting: The Ultimate Denial of the Soul” *Tradition, Family and Property*, January 28, 2019, <https://www.tfp.org/human-composting-the-ultimate-denial-of-the-soul/> (accessed May 21, 2021).

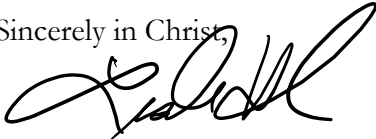
¹⁰ Paula Katinas, “Catholics Blast Bill Allowing Composting of Human Remains” *The Tablet*, May 19, 2021, <https://thetablet.org/catholics-blast-bill-allowing-composting-of-human-remains/> (accessed May 21, 2021)

¹¹ Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Instruction on Respect for Human Life *Donum vitae* (February 22, 1987) Part I, §4. https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_19870222_respect-for-human-life_en.html

Please join us this week for the Nick Loeb Q&A and the Women's health webinars in Spanish and Polish. In June we will be promoting the USCCB program to oppose repeal of the Hyde Amendment. Please go to www.NoTaxpayerAbortion.com to sign the petition now. And stay tuned for more information on World Day for Grandparents and the Elderly (July 25)!

Armed with the gifts of the Holy Spirit and the intercession of the most Blessed Virgin Mary, let us persevere in prayer to build an authentic culture of life and for each other!

Sincerely in Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Lisa Honkanen', with a large, stylized flourish at the end.

Lisa A. Honkanen, M.D.