

Last month the Seattle City Council voted to make it illegal to display someone's body without their permission. This might seem a strange law, but it was directed at a recent display at, I believe, the Pacific Science Center, entitled "Bodies." This exhibit consisted of a number of cadavers from China with the skin peeled off to reveal the dead person's muscles (the bodies came from prisoners who died in the Chinese prison system). The muscles were dyed and plasticized to the point where they looked like the illustrations in a medical textbook. The bodies were set in various action poses. Some thought it looked cool and showed the beauty of the human body. But I and others, including the Seattle City Council apparently, found it profoundly disturbing.

Today we celebrate Mary's Assumption into heaven, soul and BODY. It is the Body part that is controversial. Even the staunchest Protestant probably thinks Mary's soul is in heaven – but with her body? That seems too much like Jesus' own resurrection. And it's true. We Catholics believe that where Jesus and Mary have gone we can hope to follow. All the saved will one day be assumed body and soul into heaven. We believe in the resurrection of the body – a hard teaching for the modern secular world to accept.

Plato, in ancient Greece, thought the person was pure spirit. The body was a prison from which to escape. Rene Descartes in the 17th century also saw the soul as a spirit absolutely separate from the material body. (I THINK therefore I am). He saw the soul as "the ghost in the machine." And at death we jettison the machine. A modern materialist would say there is no soul. The body is all there is. When it dies it's all over. The person ceases to exist.

We Catholics believe something very different from all of these. Our body is good. It is part of us. We are incarnate spirits, our bodies and spirit are so closely intertwined that to separate them kills us. It is true that at that death our soul survives as pure spirit. But the church teaches that we are incomplete in heaven until the end of time when there will be a resurrection of all our bodies. As human persons we are soul and BODY. You see, Mary at her Assumption just got to go early. But we are all able to follow her one day.

But there's no denying that the ghost in the machine idea is powerful in our society. That leads to viewing our bodies as something we cast away at death, never to return to them. Kind of like a snake shedding its skin. This idea is behind the Bodies exhibit at the Science Center. Were those bodies on display real parts of real immortal human beings who will rise from the dead some day? Or are they just the physical debris and residue left over after the death of a purely material creature who is forever dead and gone?

We Catholics venerate the bodies of the saints. You may have seen relics -- the bones or bodies of incorrupt saints -- in Europe. We Catholics are very earthy people. So what's the difference between that and the Science Center exhibit? Well, we view those bodies and bones as worthy of the greatest honor precisely because they are STILL part of our heroes. They are not anonymous objects divorced from the person they are part of. The dignity of the human body stems from its being a part of an individual, immortal human being. That is why Catholics treat the body as we do – with dignity. With that context in place I would like to talk to you briefly about our Catholic burial practices – speaking about being earthy. The standard Catholic burial is burial of the whole body. Just like Jesus' burial.

Cremation was, until recently, forbidden for Catholics because of the past practices of pagans who burned their bodies in late Roman times as a sign they were not Christians and did not believe in the resurrection of the body. But now we cremate for different reasons. Therefore, cremation is now permitted. There's nothing wrong with it, but burial of the body is still preferred by the Catholic Church precisely as a sign of our hope in the resurrection of the body. And if there is to be cremation the Church asks that, if it is possible, the cremation be done after the funeral so the body can be present at the funeral mass.

Finally, we do not allow the scattering of ashes. There is to be a burial site where the family and friends can gather to pray for the dead, and from which in symbolic terms the body will be raised on the Last Day. Not that God's will can be frustrated by our design or actions. He can raise our body on the Last Day no matter what we do to it. But the sign-value of our actions is important in supporting our belief in the resurrection of the body, and the dignity of the human person.

Mary's feasts always tell us something about who Jesus is. And what the Assumption tells us is that Jesus is the one who restores everything. He is the first Adam sent to restore what the first Adam lost. Just as Mary is the second Eve sent to heal by her obedience to God's plan what the first Eve had lost by her disobedience.

Knowing that, listen again to the first reading from I Cor. 15: "Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep. For since death came through man, the resurrection of the dead came also through man. For just as in Adam all die, so too in Christ shall all be brought to life, but each one in proper order."

The Assumption of Mary is about many things, including the great dignity of Mary as Mother of God that gained her the privilege not to see the corruption of her body. But in addition, it is about restoration -- the restoration of the whole person, body as well as soul. Our society is in danger of losing this regard for the dignity of the human person. I see this even in the way we use and dispose of our bodies. But the Assumption can remind us of our own dignity in the face of our culture's disregard -- that in Christ there will a restoration of all we have lost by sin and death. And that Mary's privilege will eventually be ours as well.