

# Turnkeys of God's Prison-House

By  
SAMUEL J. ROBB, S.J.

Also

The Christian Cemetery  
Cremation

Reprinted from  
THE CATHOLIC MIND

THE AMERICA PRESS  
New York, N. Y.

# AMERICA REVIEWS THE WEEK

---

---

AMERICA IS A REVIEW OF THE WEEK . . . of every week in the year . . . all news, every event, all activities, week by week, are searched out . . . and commented upon and surveyed and judged . . . new thought, new theories, new policies, new trends, are studied and evaluated . . . government in the city, in the state, in the United States, in foreign nations . . . economics, of which so many clashing systems have arisen . . . sociology, which touches modern living so closely . . . education from the primary grades to the post-graduate courses . . . history in the making and as made . . . philosophy, ethics, psychology . . .

morality, and the decadence from the moral code . . . the affirmation of the Creed and dogma, and the rejection of religion and the supernatural . . . literature and contemporary books . . . the latest productions in the theater, the most recent portrayals in motion pictures . . . music, painting, sculpture and the graphic arts . . . by editors who are alert to the slightest change in this present fast-moving world and who are sound thinkers and clear writers . . . assisted by contributors who are authorities in the matters they discuss and by authors who are nationally and internationally famous . . . so that AMERICA reviews the week.

Subscription: Domestic . . . . . \$4.50 a year  
Canada . . . . . 5.00 a year  
Foreign . . . . . 5.50 a year

THE **AMERICA** PRESS

53 Park Place

New York, N. Y.

*Imprimi Potest:*

EDWARD C. PHILLIPS, S.J., *Provincial Maryland-New York.*

*Nihil Obstat:*

ARTHUR J. SCANLAN, S.T.D., *Censor Librorum.*

*Imprimatur:*

✠ PATRICK CARDINAL HAYES, *Archbishop of New York.*

October 20, 1930

Fourth Printing, 1940

Thirty-third Thousand

Copyright, 1931, by THE AMERICA PRESS

# Turnkeys of God's Prison-House

SAMUEL J. ROBB, S.J.

THE year 430 B.C. was a memorable one for the people of Greece. It was the year of the great plague when thousands of homes were made desolate by the hand of death; it also ushered in the close of the Peloponnesian war when victory perched upon the standards of Sparta, but only at the cost of thousands of youthful lives. In the midst of his countrymen's grief, the great Athenian orator, Pericles, mounted the rostrum in the Acropolis, and after dwelling on the glory of Athens and the noble deeds of her soldier sons, he turned his attention to those in sorrow and tried to console them for the loss of their relatives and friends. When he had advanced the loftiest material motives for sacrifice that his poor pagan intellect could invent, he turned to the sorrowing parents of the dead and proffered the most consoling doctrine that the most gifted statesman of the golden age of Greece could think of:

"And you," he said, "the mothers and fathers of the slain, whose sons have died in honorable battle in defense of their native land, think of the honor and glory you share with the noble dead. You who are still young may entertain hopes of raising other sons to fight for Athens; and you who are advanced in age have not, thanks to the gods, many more years to bear your sorrow."

In this great oration, one of the masterpieces of pagan oratory, there is not a word of faith, not a ray of hope, not a thought of charity.

Some five hundred years later, another Lawgiver and Teacher, yea, the greatest this world of sorrow has ever known, stood at the grave of His friend Lazarus, and just before He raised the dead to life and restored him to his sorrowing sisters, He spoke those memorable words which have been the comfort and consolation of every Christian heart in sorrow, words that have robbed death of victory and the grave of its sting, words that have changed the very meaning of death from *hopeless loss* to *hopeful separation*: "I am the resurrection and the life; he that believeth in Me, although he be dead, shall live, and every-one that liveth and believeth in Me shall not die forever."

If it be not irreverent, my friend, to compare the words of Christ with those of Pericles, the Christian motives for consolation with those of the cultured Greek, the hope the future holds out to those of the true Faith, with the black despairing *lack of hope* that stared in the face of the grief-stricken adorers of the "Unknown God," then we can come to but one conclusion: that there is for the faithful Christian, no real death, but merely a transition, a passing from a temporal life of care to an eternal life of happiness; for death is swallowed up in victory. "Thanks be to God," we may truly say with St. Paul, "who has given us the victory through Our Lord Jesus Christ."

The great St. Paul, than whom no man better knew the heights and depths of human sorrow, solves our doubt if any there be: "We will not have you ignorant," he says, "concerning them that are asleep, that you sorrow not like those without hope." One poor tent-maker of Tarsus, he who was beaten with rods, stoned and beheaded for his Redeemer, does not forbid us to sorrow for our dead—but only to sorrow like those without hope; like those who never heard of the Death and Resurrection of our Elder Brother, Jesus Christ, like those who never heard the consoling words of the God of all Consolation—"I am the resurrection and the life; he that believeth in Me, although he be dead, shall live, and everyone that liveth and believeth in Me shall not die forever."

Thus in this devotion to the Holy Souls, we find a complete and beautiful exercise of three great virtues of Faith, Hope and Charity, the supernatural fountains of the whole spiritual life: of faith in the infallible word of Him who is "the Way, the Truth, and the Life," who "can neither deceive nor be deceived"; of hope in the infinite merits of Him who is true God, coequal, coeternal with the Heavenly Father; of charity that imitates the great love of Him who, being God, took upon Himself the form of a slave, and lived, suffered, and died to pay the infinite debt that was lodged against our names in the ledger of life. "And of these three the greatest of all is charity."

In the book of Job we find the words "that man is born to suffer as the bird to fly," and yet there is nothing that our poor human nature shrinks from so instinctively as personal suffering or sorrow. How comes it then, that with an almost equally strong instinct, the human heart seeks to

alleviate or actually share in the sorrows of others? How, except that this sympathy, this compassion, this suffering with others which is found in greater or less degree in every human heart, is but a finite participation in God's infinite and most beautiful attribute, Mercy—mercy that has been implanted in the human heart, that we may aid one another in bearing the sorrows and trials of life. "Bear ye one another's burdens" for "I will have mercy and not justice" saith the Lord. The fluttering bird with its shattered wing, the crying child with its broken toy, the strong man bowed in grief at some awful calamity—all excite our compassion in greater or less degree. Throw the mantle of sorrow about the veriest outcast, and at once we become interested in the story of his life, at once he enlists our sympathy and aid, for through the badge of suffering, he becomes a member of the great brotherhood of suffering humanity whose head is our suffering Saviour, Jesus Christ.

And yet, strange to say, there is one class of sufferers, who, though the most deserving of our sympathy, receive the smallest share of it. They are the keenest sufferers of the whole human family, yet while we hasten to relieve the physical suffering of those round about us, they receive but little succor and assistance from us. They are bound to us by the closest ties of kinship and love, by years of service and sacrifice, yet we think less often of them perhaps than of our latest acquaintance of a day's standing. Be the reason what it may, distracting duties, the cares that infest the day, the gruelling struggle for food and raiment, the constant demands of physical suffering that surround us on all sides—reasons that explain but do not excuse our neglect—the haunting fact remains that the cruellest sufferers of the human family, the dearest relatives and friends of our bosom, those to whom we are most indebted by every known law of charity and justice, the Suffering Souls in Purgatory, are assisted least by us who owe them most.

The Suffering Souls! Surely if suffering may be predicated of anyone it may in all truth of these our brethren in Purgatory. We know the torture of a burnt finger, but a burn is inflicted by a fire which God has given to man to be his friend and servant. Now can we imagine the agony of a soul clothed in a garment of fire kindled by God's impartial justice? Can we fancy the tortures of a soul permeated with fire as iron in a forge, a soul that breathes in

these scorching flames as you do the pure cool air on some lofty cliff, a soul through whom this cruel fire circulates as does the tingling blood through your veins on these crisp November evenings?

Of all the forms of suffering or death, that by fire is most dreaded by men. Perhaps you recall the awful fire in the Triangle Building in New York a few years ago. Some three hundred women and young girls were trapped in a loft building by the merciless foe. Brave rescuers came promptly to their aid; stream upon stream kept pouring in on the flames from the great water-towers, but the relentless enemy, fire, kept gaining steadily on its helpless victims. The firemen stretched out huge nets and hoisted the scaling ladders, working in a frenzy of haste and shouting to the terrorized victims to keep up their courage till help could reach them and carry them down the ladders to safety. But they might as well have forbade the waves of the ocean to break upon the shore. With help and assistance before them, with life and happiness all but within their grasp, with relatives and friends imploring them with outstretched hands to hold out a few moments longer—they jumped one after another, and came crashing through the life nets to the cruel paving stones below. Anything, even certain death, rather than the breath of those cruel devouring flames!

My dear friends, this is but a rough sketch of the horror and agony of fire, and cruel as it may seem, there is still another torture which the poor Souls in Purgatory suffer which makes that of fire pale into insignificance. It is the pain of separation—the great homesickness for Heaven. You have seen, perhaps, the wild bird dash itself against its prison bars in its futile efforts to regain its woodland home. You have heard of the faithful hound by its master's grave, refusing to eat or drink except from the hand that was wont to feed it. Add to this animal suffering the light of intelligence, the realization of sorrow, the appreciation of separation; make the one separated a hungering human soul with a capacity for possessing the Infinite, and an all-beautiful, all-loving, all-perfect God, by whom and for whom this soul was created, by whom it can alone be satisfied and you have a faint idea of the poor soul's homesickness for Heaven.

Homesickness for Heaven and God! Is there any won-

der that the pains of such a malady should be well-nigh infinite? We can imagine the feelings of the emigrant as he sails from his native shores and sees the outline of his little home sink below the distant horizon. We can fancy the piercing grief of the mother as she hears the first clod of moist earth fall dully upon the coffin that enwraps the body of her child. But these are human sorrows and finite, and, poignant though they be, the hand of time by God's great Mercy will render them bearable. Even the pagan philosopher, Cicero, knew this when he wrote a letter to a grieving friend "there is no human grief, however heavy, that the hand of time cannot lighten and render bearable." But the pain of the Suffering Souls in Purgatory cannot be assuaged by the distractions of human life. In its holy monotony there are no distractions.

To illustrate this feeling of longing, yet complete resignation, let me tell you of an incident which happened in a Catholic family a few years ago—the full significance of it only a Catholic heart can appreciate. He was an old man broken in health and the father of a numerous family: the Angel of Death had called; others had gone from the family fireside to follow various walks of life, leaving the old man alone with his youngest daughter. Yet he never felt alone, for she, the lambkin of the flock, as he fondly called her, was always near him. Her eyes supplied his failing sight; her voice was the sweetest music to which his ear was attuned; her hand was a staff to his tottering feet. But one day God demanded a sacrifice of his faithful servant, as He had of the patriarch Abraham of old, except that God stayed not the sacrificial act. One day she came and knelt before him and taking his withered hands in hers and gently stroking them as was her wont, she told him that she had heard the voice of God calling her to follow in His footsteps as a Sister. But she would wait. She would not leave him alone in his failing age. The old man, however, knew her longings as he knew his own. He knew his death might be years distant and then it might be too late for her to enter the hall of the Bridegroom, or the voice of God might be drowned by the music of an alluring world, and so, like another Jephtha he summoned up all his courage and with his thoughts on the great separation on Calvary, he bade her go in the name of Him who had given and was taking her away. The day of parting came. He pressed

her hand for the last time, he stroked her golden hair soon to be shorn for the love of Christ, and kissed her goodbye forever. Then he sat at the window and watched her through the mist of his tears till she became a blurred speck in the distance! For him the lamp of life was shattered, the music of life was hushed, the joy of life had fled and in its place had come that aching void, that heart hunger that only the Infinite can satisfy. Yet he would not have things otherwise, he would not have his child back even if he could; and in a year or two God, in His Mercy, called His faithful servant home.

Akin to this feeling, but magnified a millionfold, is the longing that the Holy Souls endure, yet all with perfect resignation. They would not have it otherwise; they would not even if they could, enter the banquet hall of the Lamb, before whom the Angels are not perfect, without the wedding garment of sinlessness. Yet their suffering, though voluntary, is none the less acute.

And who are these Poor Souls who have so just a claim upon our spiritual mercy? For one it is a father, who toiled day in and day out, with that quiet uncomplaining sacrifice so characteristic of Catholic fathers, to give his boy that education which he himself was denied, an education in a Catholic school which always means additional sacrifice, but a sacrifice held as nothing because it holds out the possibility of his son one day standing at God's altar. For another it is a mother, with all the nobility the term implies, one who did not hesitate to bring her children into life in her own pain, and to cheerfully accept the responsibilities of Catholic motherhood. She it was who watched by day and sleepless night at the bedside of her child through years of infant sickness; at whose knee he learned to lisp the names of Jesus and Mary; who unnoticed, always took the poorest for herself—at table, the heel of the bread, the smallest ear of corn—one of whom a young man once said, "We children never knew a chicken had a neck till after mother died." Or it may be a sister—one who has showered upon us that warm unselfish love which always exists in Catholic families between a sister and a brother. She may have been an elder sister, one of the unsung heroines of almost every large Catholic family, whom the world contemptuously styles an "old maid," but whom God has called a "martyr of charity." She may have silently sacri-



ficed golden opportunities in life to assist her struggling parents in giving an education to her younger brothers and sisters, giving them the very opportunity which she herself has so nobly sacrificed.

Or it may be a friend, a faithful companion who has helped us over the rough spots in life, who has shared life's joys and sorrows with us, and who now asks us to share his sorrow that we may one day share his joy in Heaven. Or, saddest of all it may be one who is suffering through our bad example, who is expiating some sin which is ours as well as his, and we are saved from being in his place only through God's inscrutable mercy.

If, as is improbable, we have no relative or friend in those detaining fires—if we have no one who can claim our personal love and gratitude, at least for the love of Him who raised us from the thralldom of Satan, to the Sonship of God—from heirs of Hell, to heirs of Heaven, for His love and His merciful name let us be mindful of the most pitiable of all—those who have none to pray for them. For they are our kindred clay, the children of our Heavenly Father, and will be our fellow citizens one day in the great and Eternal City of God.

You have seen, perhaps, in the cars and on the billboards, the poster of the little crippled child, leaning heavily on its crutches, its little legs trussed up in iron braces,—and under it the caption, "Suppose Nobody Cared." Now look at that fiery lake called Purgatory, see the upturned, patient faces of its sufferers, see their weary arms stretched out to you and me for help, hear their piteous cry for aid, a cry that should reach the depths of every human heart, "Have pity on me at least you my friends"—and then think, "Suppose Nobody Cared!"

But we do care, my friends, we must care. We do care, for by the law of Christian charity, we are our brother's keepers. We are, like Joseph, the guardians of God's granaries of grace, and today it is our duty and our privilege to break the bread of kindness for our suffering brethren. We are ordained today into a lay apostolate to apply to our suffering brethren the infinite merits of our Master's sacred Body and Blood. In Holy Communion we hold in our bosoms, Omnipotence in Bonds—we hold as a hostage in our hearts, the Son of the King of Kings, and we may in all justice demand from the Eternal Father a princely

ransom—a ransom worthy of the Son of the King of Kings. God has made us the turnkeys of His blessed prison-house. He has shackled His own omnipotence and has given us the keys of comfort and peace. He has given us a power which He has denied His omnipotent self, the power to bridge over the yawning chasm between Purgatory and Heaven, with the Jacob's ladder of His Infinite and our own finite merits, whereby the angels of mercy may descend and ascend to Heaven, bearing in their arms those whose ransom we have paid. Suppose nobody cared?

The *royal* devotion of the Church are the works of mercy—and see how they are all satisfied in this devotion to the dead:

1. It *feeds the hungry* souls with Jesus, the Bread of Angels.

2. It gives *drink to the thirsty* souls—a draught of His own Precious Blood.

3. It *clothes the naked* with a garment of eternal glory.

4. It *comforts the sick* with a medicine almighty to heal their wounds.

5. It visits the imprisoned with a visit of God's angels.

6. It *frees the captive* from a bondage more dreadful than death.

7. It *buries the dead* in Christ's bosom, in peace.

If the cup of cold water given in God's name shall not go unrewarded, if the widow's mite escaped not the all-seeing eye, what shall be our reward for helping God's special friends? Unlike Pharaoh's servants, these Poor Souls will never forget their deliverers, no, neither now nor hereafter. At this very moment they are most powerful intercessors with God; and when they have reached their home in Heaven, their voices shall plead "like angels trumpet-tongued," for us, their struggling brethren here below. Then when the end shall come, and we shall be, by God's Mercy, where they now are, how happy shall he be who shall hear his own defense taken up surely and eloquently, by crowds of blessed souls to whom he was kind and merciful while they waited in their prison-house of hope. Then he shall say in astonishment—"Lord, when did I do all these good things?" And Our Lord will point to His chosen friends, the Holy Souls, and say—"Amen, I say to you, what you did to the least of these My brethren, you did unto Me."

# The Christian Cemetery ✓

REV. PETER J. BERNARDING.

*Preached June 12, 1927, in St. Wendelin's Cemetery, Pittsburgh, Pa., on occasion of the blessing of a crucifixion group.*

THE ground whereon we stand today, beloved brethren, is holy ground. It has been consecrated and set aside by the Church to be the last resting place of those who, like St. Paul, have fought a good fight and have finished their course and kept the faith (2 Tim. iv, 7). It has been hallowed by the men and women who here stood at the open grave of those they had loved in life, and gave evidence of their love in tears of Christian sorrow. It has been hallowed by the tears of loving mothers, weeping, like the widowed mother of Naim, for the loss of a child; it has been hallowed by the tears of devoted husbands and wives, sorrowing at being bereft of a beloved spouse; it has been hallowed by the tears of pious children, lamenting the untimely death of an idolized parent. For the tears of Christian sorrow, when accompanied with a humble resignation to the Divine will, are indeed purifying and sanctifying. Did not Christ Himself give vent in tears to His sympathy for the bereaved sisters Mary and Martha at the grave of His friend Lazarus?

The ground on which we stand today has been sanctified likewise by the bodies of the servants of God resting here: first, of the zealous priests, who amid great hardships laid the foundation of this flourishing parish, the while they kept alive and increased, by word and example, the light of faith in the hearts of their people; next, of those early settlers, who so nobly assisted their priest in his labors and gave so unstintingly for their substance that a worthy temple might be reared for the worship of the one, true God, and a school built in which their children might be taught the saving Faith of their fathers; and last, it has been sanctified by the bodies of all the Faithful who died fortified with the Sacraments of the Church, who have gone before us with the sign of faith, and here, close to the scene of their earthly pilgrimage, now sleep the last, long sleep of peace.

Within this hallowed enclosure rest the bones of many a saint of God, who while on earth followed in his own lowly

way the footsteps of Jesus Crucified, and by the example of a truly Christian life became a shining light and a staunch support to those in whose midst he lived and walked. Not one of those sleeping here may ever be raised by the Church to the honor of her altars and have his name inscribed on the long list of her saints; but we may rest assured, nevertheless, that many of them are among that unnumbered multitude "of all nations and tribes and people and tongues," which St. John beheld in Apocalyptic vision and whose feast the Church celebrates each year on the first day of November.

We are gathered together in this holy place, my dear brethren, to bless the beautiful crucifixion group lately erected here by the care of your devoted pastor. What could be more fitting to the occasion than to read with you once again the lessons taught us by the Christian God's acre and to endeavor to show you the meaning of this group?

The Christian cemetery teaches us how uncertain and how short, even at best, is human life. Though this is a lesson that even one who runs may read, still we are all too prone to forget it in the hustle and bustle of life. But our cemeteries remind us that death is very much with us; indeed, that it is a stubborn fact which none can escape. We are young and healthy, and we say to ourselves: "I have many years to live." But read the inscriptions on the stones that stand row upon row in this city of the dead, and you will soon be undeceived.

Is it only the old that die? There you will see that no age is proof against death. For there lie men of every age: the tender babe whose life was snuffed out almost as soon as it beheld the light of day; the youth and maiden, snatched out of life, like fair blossoms, in the bloom of springtime; the man and woman, stricken down, like the sturdy oak, in their very prime; as well as those to whom death came as a relief after the decrepitude of a ripe old age. The story told on every head-stone is this: "Life is uncertain. You may, indeed, live, as you are telling yourself, for many years to come, but you may also be called to your dread account this very night. For death comes as a thief in the night."

This lesson, too, is to be read on the graves of the dead: "Life is exceedingly short." Where now are the men and women who saw the beginnings of this parish? Hardly one

of them left, though scarcely fifty years have come and gone since that day! Where now is the congregation that once sat in the pews you now occupy in yonder church? Their names have been carved for many a year on the silent tomb! And they seem to say to us, the living: "You, too, are in the long procession to the grave. For you, too, will come—and come all too soon—the day on which you must die. You, too, will one day be brought hither between the narrow walls of a coffin; for you, too, the priest will say the last prayers; you, too, will be lowered into the cold grave and covered over with earth; and friends and relatives will go away to forget you in the press of life, even as they have forgotten us."

While the cemetery speaks to us of the uncertainty and shortness of life, it likewise teaches us the littleness and the greatness of the human body. Hither that body, which we so cherished and pampered in life, will one day be brought a loathsome thing even to those who loved us best. Here it will be shovelled out of sight to become the food of worms and to revert to that dust from which in the beginning it was fashioned by the almighty hand of God. Not in vain does the Church admonish us as she traces a cross of ashes on our foreheads at the beginning of each Lent, "Remember, man, that thou art dust, and unto dust shalt thou return!" Not in vain does she repeat the same solemn words over the earthly remains of each Christian as he is consigned to the grave, the while her minister flings on the coffin the first handful of earth.

Yes, nothing speaks so eloquently of the littleness of man as the grave. It is here we begin to understand what prompted the Royal Psalmist to ask: "What is man that thou art mindful of him? Or the son of man that thou shouldst visit him?" (Ps. viii, 5.) It is here we begin to realize the meaning of the words of Isaias: "All flesh is grass, and the glory thereof as the flower of the field. The grass is withered, and the flower fallen, because the Spirit of the Lord has blown upon it" (Is. xl, 6, 7).

But why, you may ask, if the human body is a thing of so little worth, does the Church guard it with such jealous care? Why does she insist that it be buried in consecrated soil? Why does she launch the curse of her excommunication against those who would dare profane it by consigning it to the flames? Hereby she would teach us, that though

the body is but a frail thing in life and a loathsome thing in death, yet it has a dignity and sacredness of its own.

That body has been the dwelling-place of an immortal spirit, created in the image and likeness of the great God Himself. It has been the instrument through which the soul wrought its good deeds in the days of the flesh. It has been thrice sealed with a sacramental unction: in Baptism, Confirmation, and Extreme Unction. In holy Baptism, it was incorporated into Christ, its members became His members. Says St. Paul: "For as many of you as have been baptized in Christ, have put on Christ" (Gal. iii, 27); and again: "Know you not that your bodies are the members of Christ?" (1 Cor. iii, 16.) Into this frail tenement has entered many a time Jesus Christ, true God and true Man, under the Eucharistic veil of bread. Here, during His stay, He worked miracles of transformation by lessening the evil force of concupiscence and bringing body and soul nearer that state of harmony in which they were first created by God. This, then, is the reason why the human body is holy; this the reason why the Church guards it in life and in death as a sacred treasure.

From time immemorial, it has been customary among Christians to erect in the place where rest the bodies of the Faithful the symbol of man's Redemption, the Holy Cross. This we are doing here today, and it is only fitting that we should ask its meaning. Under the cross, we see the figures of Our Blessed Lady and St. John. They remind us how we are to bear our bereavement, when death takes away from our side a dear relative or friend.

In the death of Christ, St. John parted for a while with the dearest of friends. That disciple, whom Jesus loved above the rest of the Apostles, to whom it was given to recline his head on the breast of Christ at the Last Supper, he alone of all the Apostles had the fortitude to follow Jesus through all the stages of His passion, to see His life's blood ebbing away from Him drop by drop, and bear Him company through the long watch of the three hours' agony. Though He must have felt more keenly than did the other Apostles the pain of seeing his beloved Master crucified, yet he stood erect beneath the bloody gibbet and was able to give support to the Mother of Jesus, whose loss was so much greater than his own.

While St. John shows us with what fortitude we must

bear the death of a friend, Mary shows parents, and especially mothers, with what submission to the Divine will they must render up their sons and daughters, when God in His superior wisdom calls them to Himself. There was no rebellion in her heart, though surely her grief was greater than that of any mother before or since. For was there ever a son that loved his mother as Jesus loved Mary? Or was there ever a mother that loved her son as Mary loved Jesus? Were there ever two hearts that beat in unison as did their hearts? And though His death was the most ignominious that hatred and a desire for revenge could inflict, yet Mary murmured not, nor complained, because it was the will of the Heavenly Father. Like Jesus, she, too, would drink the cup of sorrow to its very dregs.

In her prayers for the bystanders at the grave, the Church asks: "Grant that they may not languish in fruitless and unavailing grief, nor sorrow as those who have no hope, but through their tears look meekly up to Thee, the God of all consolation." She herself holds out to us a two-fold consolation. The first is to be found in her assurance, that though the bodily presence of our loved ones has been removed, yet we can still commune with their souls in the other world. Deeply rooted in the human heart is the desire to hold communion with its dead, and we find few things so unbearable as the thought, that those we have loved in life should have passed forever beyond the power of recall. This desire gave birth of old to the vagaries of necromancy and in more recent days to the fraudulent or diabolical practices of spiritism. But the Catholic Church, which satisfies every lawful aspiration of the human breast, alone shows the way ordained by God to still this longing.

How soothing to the heart is her doctrine regarding those who have fallen asleep in the Lord! Between them and the living there is not fixed a gulf which no man can pass, but in virtue of the Communion of Saints they still form with us one great spiritual body. We are the Church Militant on earth, they are the Church Suffering in Purgatory. Just as the members of our body can go to the help of each other, so we can come to their aid, and they to ours. By our Masses, our prayers, our good works, we can hasten the day when they will be admitted to the Beatific Vision in heaven. By their prayers to God in our behalf, they can procure for us many graces and obtain for us

protection from many dangers. The representation of the Suffering Souls at the base of the cross reminds us of their great need. For them has come "the night when no man can work," and they look to us to come to their help. How consoling to think that we can do something for them in death, especially if we have to reproach ourselves with negligence towards them in life.

The second great consolation which the Church holds out to the mourners at the grave is the promise of the resurrection. It is almost with a note of exultation in his voice that the priest reads the antiphon to the *Benedictus*: "I am the resurrection and the life; he that believeth in Me, although he be dead, shall live, and everyone that liveth and believeth in Me, shall not die forever" (John xi, 25). It is of this promise that the Cross, rising here from the midst of the graves, reminds us. He who on the Cross gave up His life for the sins of the world was not suffered to see corruption. Death, though He submitted to it for a time, could not hold dominion over the Lord of life. "Destroy this temple," He had said, "and *in three days I will raise it up*" (John ii, 19), and, "They shall deliver Him to the Gentiles to be mocked, and scourged, and crucified, and *the third day He shall rise again*" (Mt. xx, 19). True to His promise, He burst asunder the cerements of the grave, and on the third day arose glorious from the tomb. Henceforth, death was to lose half its terrors for the man of faith, for in the historic fact of Christ's Resurrection he sees the pledge of his own future resurrection. We read in St. Paul: "If in this life we have hope in Christ, we are of all men the most miserable. But now Christ is risen from the dead, the first fruits of them that sleep. For by a man came death; and by a man the resurrection of the dead. And as in Adam all die, so also in Christ all shall be made alive" (1 Cor. xv, 19-22).

The Christian, therefore, need not sorrow as those who have no hope. For him, the gloom of the grave is dispelled by the light of the resurrection to come. And as he stands at the grave of his friend, he can confidently say to himself: "This parting will not be forever. At the end of time, this my friend will rise again, and I shall see him in his own flesh." Yes, with St. Paul, he can truly exclaim: "For this corruptible [body] must put on incorruption, and this mortal [body] must put on immortality. And



when this mortal [body] shall have put on immortality, then shall come to pass the saying that is written: "Death is swallowed up in victory. O death, where is thy victory? O death, where is thy sting?" (1 Cor. xv, 53-55.)

## Cremation

*Written by H. T. in the "Westminster Cathedral Chronicle" and reprinted from the "Bombay Examiner."*

**A**LTHOUGH the practice of cremation, so far as concerns Catholics, is unequivocally condemned by the Church—the declaration from the Holy See, *A. A. S.* July 1, 1926, reaffirms previous condemnations—it appears clearly enough, even from the terms of official pronouncements on the subject, that the prohibition does not profess to be based on the natural law or on any direct commandment of God. Like other ordinances emanating from ecclesiastical authority, the existing legislation could conceivably be abrogated by the Pope or by a General Council, but it would be a mistake, on the other hand, to look upon it as a mere disciplinary measure, temporary in its character and called forth only by the needs of the present time.

The attitude of the Church in this matter, as was said in these pages some considerable time ago, is directed by a tradition which goes back to the earliest centuries of our era.

The Christians of the Apostolic age found themselves confronted by a very general practice of burning the bodies of the dead. Partly for symbolic reasons, partly out of deep reverence for the body of man which is some day to participate in the glory of the risen life, they made it an invariable rule, as the catacombs bear witness, to inter the remains of their dead, leaving the work of dissolution to nature alone.

From the very beginning it has been taken for granted in the language and liturgy of the Church, that the bodies of those who have departed in Christ should be committed to the earth from which they were originally taken. The cemetery, as the etymology of the word denotes, is a "sleeping place," where the just "rest from their labors," but the sleep is not eternal. Man, like the seed committed to the ground, "is sown in corruption, but shall rise in incorrup-

tion." Very appropriately, and in accordance with formularies which can be traced back for more than a thousand years, the cemetery itself is consecrated by the Bishop with special prayers. The prayers, amongst other things, implore God to grant that in the spot thus hallowed the mortal remains of the faithful may repose undisturbed until the archangel's trumpet shall summon them to judgment.

Respect for a symbolism thus authorized by immemorial tradition amounts to something more than mere sentiment. The sense of continuity with the past enters deep into the religious feelings of the people; neither are their ideas of what is reverent and becoming, or the reverse, in the treatment of the bodies of the dead, to be lightly set aside. For these reasons no Catholic who respects the instincts of the simple Faithful would wish without adequate cause to cut adrift from the traditional practice which comes down from Apostolic times. But while this negative motive alone would fully justify ecclesiastical opposition to the cremationist movement, the case is much strengthened by the facts which have been made clear in recent discussions and agitations.

The attempt to introduce cremation into Catholic countries like Italy and France was not made merely in the interests of hygienic reform, but was rightly understood to be a blow aimed at the Church herself and at her teaching regarding the resurrection of the body. The agitation began to assume a practical shape about the year 1867. It was not until 1886 that the Holy See, having had ample time to ascertain the real bearings of the movement, pronounced its formal condemnation. In this decree we hear of the "attempt made by men of doubtful faith and members of the Masonic lodges to reintroduce the pagan custom of burning the bodies of the dead"; and fear is expressed lest "the esteem and reverence for the constant Christian practice of burying in the earth the bodies of the Faithful—a practice consecrated by the Church with solemn rites—should gradually diminish." That the movement was to a large extent a development of the anti-Christian propaganda carried on by French and Italian Freemasonry has been fully shown by various Catholic writers.

The advantages claimed for cremation from the point of view of sanitation and economy are dependent in very large measure upon its *general* adoption. And yet universal cremation, including, of course, the carcasses of animals,

is surely a chimera. The body of a dead rat is just as likely to become a source of infection, in proportion to its bulk, as that of a human being. Yet nobody proposes that all the dead rats should be collected and burnt at the public expense. No conceivable organization could accomplish such a task. Moreover, the fact is that quite apart from any opposition on religious grounds, cremation makes no great appeal to the majority of mankind. In spite of the erection of many crematoria all over the world, the system has not conspicuously grown in popular favor. The number of persons cremated by their own choice is still relatively small, neither is there any notable saving of expense as compared with the cost of interment. On the other hand, there is abundant expert testimony available to show that where reasonable precautions are taken no serious hygienic dangers are to be feared from the ordinary burial ground.

Any project of universal and compulsory cremation would rob the world of something which is of genuine moral value in the stimulus given to virtue, patriotism and other qualities we can ill dispense with. Anyone who has ever visited the burial ground of Père la Chaise in Paris on the *Jour des Ames* (All Souls' Day) will understand what is meant. The funeral urn, however reverently preserved, can never awaken such association as are called up by the village churchyard or even by the public cemetery. Catholics who believe in Purgatory and in the expiatory power of prayer will feel this influence most, but even outside the Church, "God's acre" has its significance for every truly Christian heart.

To take a point of relatively minor importance, general adoption of cremation would put considerable obstacles in the way of detection of certain forms of crime. The poisoner, once the corpse of his victim had been conveyed to the crematorium, would nearly always be in a position to snap his fingers at human justice. He might be gravely suspected, but rarely would it be possible to find evidence which could secure conviction. . . .

On the other hand, it should not be forgotten that though ecclesiastical authority forbids cremation under penalty even of depriving of Christian burial those who direct that their remains should be thus disposed of, still this opposition is not so uncompromising as to ignore the

issues created by a real necessity. Where infection is feared, as for example in the case of pestilence, if it should be decided by competent authority that the corpses must be burned, the Church would not withhold her sanction and her rites. In point of fact, a similar relaxation of the law was accorded by the Holy See in recent years in the case of an island in the Pacific where the civil government made cremation compulsory for all inhabitants without exception. The decree, which was addressed to the Vicar Apostolic of the Sandwich Islands, is dated January 26, 1911. It enacts that in cases in which cremation has been carried out in deference to the requirements of the law, and without the previous consent of the deceased or his family, the ashes may afterwards be interred in consecrated ground with the usual rites of the Church.

Finally, it may be pointed out that the attitude of the Church towards cremation is only the natural and almost necessary correlative of her teaching regarding relics and veneration of the bodies of the Saints.

## Cremation of the Dead

*Editorial reprinted from the "Catholic Medical Guardian," the quarterly journal of the Guild of St. Luke, St. Cosmas and St. Damian, England.*

**W**E wish here to summarize only some of the objections that the Church has to this method of disposal of the human dead. Practically there are only two methods of the disposal of the dead: burial and cremation. We need not trouble about other methods. From the sanitary point of view we may allow that, especially in towns, burial becomes more and more difficult as population increases and land becomes more valuable, and in times of epidemic and beleaguering in war, etc., cremation has to be resorted to. Nevertheless, cremation as practised by millions of Hindus, some Chinese, and American Indians is by no means an unobjectionable alternative. The cremation grounds, generally on the banks of lakes and rivers, are littered with the half-burned remnants of humanity and exposed to pariah dogs, wild beasts and birds of prey—and the sight is exceedingly horrifying and sickening; while the water is often grievously contaminated by floating corpses, to the disgust

and danger of neighboring inhabitants and boatmen, extended by their being made the food of fish, lobsters, and shrimps, etc., which in times of certain epidemics spread disease and death to far distant regions. The writer for the last reason abstained from fish for several years while resident in certain parts of India.

Burial is practised by probably the largest mass of humanity; all Christians, Mohammedans, Buddhists, Jews, the lower Indian castes, and most savage races. In warm climates and in sandy or porous soils decomposition is rapid, and if burial be in earth and deep enough, inoffensive.

But the direct concern of the Church in corpse disposal is not with custom or sanitation, but with the spiritual aspect of the question. Moreover, it is not, of course, a matter of unalterable dogma, but of variable discipline which for wise reasons the Church enforces on her subjects. It is remarkable that, although pagans also bury, cremation has generally been practised by them, even from early ages. The Jews, except in times of pestilence and war, buried; and Christians have invariably done the same. Thus the Patriarchs Abraham, Jacob, and Joseph of Egypt were buried, and Our Lord raised the dead Lazarus from his tomb, while He Himself was buried in the sepulcher of Joseph of Arimathea. For three hundred years from the end of the first century the Roman Christians buried their dead in the Catacombs.

The prohibitive legislation by the Church rests on strong motives, since, as Fr. W. Devin, S.J., says: "Cremation in the majority of cases today is knit up with circumstances that make it a public profession of irreligion and Materialism. It was the Freemasons that first obtained official recognition of this practice from various governments. The campaign opened in Italy, the first attempt being made by Brunetti, at Padua, in 1873." (For this and other details see "Catholic Encyclopedia," Vol. IX, p. 482.) And thence it spread. It should here be also stated that in the early centuries of the Christian Era, the pagans, in order to destroy faith in the resurrection of the body, often cast the corpses of the martyrs into the flames, imagining that they thus rendered this impossible. The Christians often risked their lives to rescue the remains of the martyrs, and several Catacomb cemeteries centered round these sacred dead.

Several synods of the Middle Ages legislated for the

burial of the dead, e.g., the Councils of Braga in 563, Nantes between the seventh and ninth centuries, Mainz and Tribur in the ninth century. But a more interesting event occurred in 1884, when the Vicar Apostolic of Vizagapatam, in the north of the Madras Presidency proposed the following difficulty to the Sacred Congregation of Propaganda: The bodies of two neophytes had been cremated, the parents testifying that there has been no idolatrous ceremonies. Should the missionaries in such cases protest against what is considered a privilege of caste, or may the following present practice be tolerated? If a pagan seeks baptism at the hour of death, the missionary grants it, without questioning what mode of sepulture is to be given the body after death, persuaded that the pagan parents will make no account of his desire to be buried, not cremated. The answer was: "You must not approve of cremation, but remain passive in the matter and confer Baptism; be careful also to instruct your people according to the principles which you set forth." This was given on September 27, 1884.

In 1886 another decree from a Roman Congregation forbade membership in Cremation Societies and declared the unlawfulness of demanding cremation for one's own body or that of another. On December 15, in the same year, a third decree was issued of more or less the same tenor.

And finally, on July 27, 1892, the Archbishop of Freiburg, among other questions, asked whether it was lawful to cooperate in the cremation of bodies either by command or counsel, or to take part as doctor, official, or laborer working in the crematory. It was answered that formal cooperation, the assent of the will to the deed, is never allowed, either by command or counsel. Material cooperation, the mere aiding in the physical act, may be tolerated on condition (1) that cremation be not looked upon as a distinct mark of a Masonic sect; (2) that there be nothing in it which of itself, directly and solely, expresses reprobation of Catholic doctrine and approbation of a sect; (3) if it be not clear that the officials and others have been assigned or invited to take part in contempt of the Catholic religion. And whereas, under the above restrictions, cooperators are to be left in good faith, they must always be warned not to intend cooperation in cremation.

These three articles  
were reprinted

in

## **THE CATHOLIC MIND**

Issue of November 8th, 1928

---

For 38 years now it has been the policy of **THE CATHOLIC MIND** to select from world wide sources and to reprint in full outstanding statements of Catholic doctrine—articles of permanent value on questions of the day—pastorals and sermons of more than local interest—speeches and addresses of moment—Papal Encyclicals and pronouncements—in a word, the best thoughts of the ablest Catholic minds.

A subscription to **THE CATHOLIC MIND** will bring you twice monthly a veritable mine of reference material on all topics of current interest.

**\$2.00 per year**

**10c per copy**

## **THE CATHOLIC MIND**

**53 Park Place**

**New York**

# LET US PRAY FOR OUR DEAD

*Bernard A. Hausmann, S.J.*

## An English Translation of the Office of the Dead

One of the best prayers for the departed is the Office of the Dead. It is the official prayer of the Church for the souls in Purgatory. Its component parts have God Himself for Author, since they are almost all psalms or other readings from the Sacred Scriptures. What better prayer can man offer to God than the prayer which God Himself inspired?

**80 pages**

**Cloth Bound**

**Price 75 cents**

*Special rates on quantity orders*

---

# PRAYERS FOR THE DYING

*Francis P. LeBuffe, S.J.*

"The author, led by a desire to help in establishing a true Christian attitude toward death and its approach, tries to emancipate us from the indiscriminate dread of death and to bring out true Christian hopefulness and abiding confidence in the Mercy of God. The book furnishes material for illuminating meditations."

*The Eccl. Review*

**64 pages**

**Cloth Bound**

**Price 30 cents**

THE **AMERICA** PRESS

**53 Park Place**

**New York, N. Y.**