

Bodies ... the Exhibition

‡ Questions and Answers from a
Catholic Perspective



Diocese of Pittsburgh

Secretariat for Education

Department for Religious Education/
Catholic Schools

Introduction

The Diocese of Pittsburgh gladly accepted the invitation of Premier Exhibitions and the Pittsburgh Science Center to contribute materials to accompany “Bodies...the Exhibition”. We have attempted to anticipate some of the theological and moral questions that are bound to be raised when people attend the Exhibit. We especially have in mind adult Catholics who may be spurred on to investigate and deepen their theological knowledge after viewing the Exhibit. Our hope is that parishes and various Church organizations who want to sponsor an event or discussion on the “Bodies exhibit” will find this brochure a useful point of departure for further thought and reflection.

Q: What is the position of the Diocese of Pittsburgh on the Bodies Exhibit?

A: The Diocese of Pittsburgh’s statement on “Bodies...the Exhibit” states that the exhibit “...can provide worthwhile and effective opportunities to promote learning...”

As the statement explained, the Diocese reviewed, to the best of its abilities, the claims made by Premier Exhibitions, the producer of the exhibit. During this process the Diocese was presented with legal documentation aimed at substantiating the claims made by individuals and institutions involved in the creation and production of the exhibit.

Indeed, there have been articles and opinions written in our local newspapers, and extensive discussions among many people of our community concerning the issues surrounding this exhibit. This dialogue has contributed greatly to the healthy discourse surrounding “Bodies...the Exhibit,” a conversation that allows for a diversity of

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opinions and beliefs to be shared. This discourse was anticipated and encouraged by the Diocese in its statement, and is part of a healthy attempt to promote the moral good. In fact, there are efforts, to provide a variety of public forums to continue the dialogue in concert with the Carnegie Science Center and Premier Exhibitions.

Q: Are there any cautions about who should attend the Exhibit?

A: Although the Exhibit is advertised as “appropriate for all ages” it is our considered opinion that parent’s should be cautious in attending with children under the age of 12. The Exhibit contains nude cadavers that have been dissected to various degrees. Therefore the Exhibit is rather graphic and intense and is not suitable for children under a certain age – presumably 12 and under. It is a guiding principle of Catholic teaching that parents are the primary educators of their children, therefore whether children should attend or not is their decision. Of course this decision should be in harmony with what good sense and the psychological sciences tell us about childhood development. In “*The Catholic Vision of Love*” (CVOL) guidelines we read the following about the “the years of innocence” (as described by Pope John Paul II in *Familiaris Consortio*, n. 37)

“The Christian family atmosphere should protect the child in these years (10 and under). Catholic homes ought not simply accept the cultural pressures that in various ways stir up unsuitable interest in genital sexuality or permit intrusion into the life of the child by media presentations of sexuality that do not respect human dignity and right values. Parental care should keep a concerned eye on the television habits of children as well as on the movies they see.” (*Guidelines CVOL*)

Q: Is it true that the bodies of pre-born babies are part of the Exhibit?

A: Yes. There are a number of little bodies in what science calls the fetal stage of development, ranging in age from 3 weeks old (from conception-not birth) to 13 weeks old. This gallery is especially poignant considering the Church’s teaching on the sanctity of life from conception to natural death. For science to recognize these preborn bodies as once having life but now being dead confirms a long and firmly held teaching of the Church. Also, when those visiting the gallery see more clearly the beauty and wonder of the development of human life in the womb the science will be difficult to deny. It is very possible that some who enter this gallery will have their views on abortion challenged. Those in the Diocese, who have seen the Exhibit thought and felt that this might be the most moving aspect of the presentation.

For those who have had abortions or who have helped procure abortions this gallery may be a means of grace. The Church, speaking in union with Jesus Christ, offers unreservedly the opportunity to repent and to be forgiven. A beautiful organization, called **Project Rachel**, exists to help women and men who have intimate experience with abortion, to seek true forgiveness and healing. For those for whom this is relevant and of interest their contact information is: <http://stlprojectrachel.org/> or by phone 412-456-3167

The Pittsburgh Diocese was assured that none of the bodies were procured by any type of abortion.

Q: This is billed as a scientific Exhibit. What elements of theology might shed some more light on the human condition as displayed in this Exhibit?

A: An exhibit like this raises a multitude of questions which cut across various sciences. Theology is the sacred science that investigates and meditates on those things we can know through reason about God and the Revelation granted to us by God that goes beyond the limits of our natural reason. Three theological topics present themselves as important reference points for fruitful discussion.

Death as a result of Original Sin.

We know from the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* that man and woman were created in an Original State of Justice (CCC 375). Man was in deep and beautiful har-

mony with God, creation, himself and his neighbor (in this case the original spousal couple). The harmony was seriously fractured by our original parents' disobedience. One of the tragic results of this is that "death" entered the world as God had forewarned (*Genesis 2:15-17*). It was not God's intention that the body/soul union ever be disrupted, but because of the violation of God's command by our first parents' free will the union was weakened and death resulted. Therefore each per-

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son who comes into this world will experience at some point the separation of the body and the soul, which we know as death. “In a sense bodily death is natural, but for faith it is in fact ‘the wages of sin’” (CCC 1006)

The Incarnation. God did not abandon us after we disobeyed. In His loving plan He began to redeem mankind through the establishment of covenants (*Genesis 3:15, Genesis 9:8-13, Genesis 12:1-3, Exodus 19:5,6, Deuteronomy 28-32*). He chose a people who would be the original bearers of these covenants, the Israelites, the Jewish people. The unfolding of God’s plan for salvation in history reached its culmination when God Himself, the Second Person of the Trinity, took on a body and became a human man who was a true Israelite (*John 1:1-18, Philippians 2:5-13*). In a majestic and unforeseen fashion God chose to take on the bodily form of those He created. Rather than shunning the disobedient sons and daughters, God chose to humble Himself and take on the true nature of His own creation. The bodily Incarnation is the great mystery of love of the Christian faith that reveals to us the Trinitarian nature of God (*John 3:16-21*) and is our great hope. (CCC 606-618)

The Resurrection. Jesus conquered death by taking on all human sinfulness despite His own sinlessness. He allowed His sacred body to be abused, crucified and buried for the sake of the salvation of the whole world. The great sign of His victory over sin and death was His bodily Resurrection on that First Easter Sunday (*John 20*). It is a core teaching of Catholicism that those who are united to Christ through the bond of sanctifying grace (God’s life in us) will some-

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day share in His Resurrection (*Romans 6:5*). The result of our first disobedience will be fully rectified when all those who have died will have their human bodies reunited with their soul (CCC 366). Those who died in a living relationship with God will have glorified bodies and those who died outside of God’s love, because of their own un-repentant disobedience, will also be reunited to their bodies, but these will not be glorified (CCC 998).

From the beginning until the end of time it is clear that the bodily nature of human beings is central to our identity (CCC 362) The body is not something extra, it is not a hindrance as some philosophies speculate, nor is it merely a machine. The classic understanding is that the body and soul make up the whole human person, therefore the body needs to be treated with the utmost respect, both while we are alive and even after death “for we are fearfully and wonderfully made” (Ps.139).

Q: What are the Catholic Church’s teachings and practices concerning burial of the deceased?

A: From the earliest moments of the Church there has been respect for the bodies of the deceased. Christ himself, with the tenderness and affection of those who loved him, was buried in a tomb upon his death (*Matthew 27:59; Mark 15:46; Luke 23:53; John 19:40*). By allowing himself to be buried Christ sanctified the tomb and made it a sacred place and a sign of hope. Throughout the life of the Church the followers of Christ have accorded similar respect and dignity to the bodies of the faithful who have died.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church teaches that, “The bodies of the dead must be treated with respect and charity, in faith and hope of the Resurrection” (CCC 2300). In fact, the Church has always considered the burial of the dead a corporal work of mercy and a charitable act (see *Tobit 1:16-18*), as “it honors the children of God, who are temples of the Holy Spirit” (CCC 2300).

That being said, the Church does make provision for the use of parts of the body after death in lieu of immediate burial. For example, the catechism teaches that the “free gift of organs after death is legitimate and can be meritorious.” Also, the body can be autopsied “for legal inquests or scientific research” (CCC 2301). It is important to note that in each of these examples the Church presupposes that the deceased body and its parts will eventually be properly interred.

Q: What is the Catholic Church’s general position on the donation of bodies for science?

A: In spite of general misconceptions to the contrary, the Catholic Church has always supported science, provided it is in accord with the

dignity of the human person and does not violate the moral law. The Catholic Church exalts human reason as a gift from God that is meant to work in concert with Faith (CCC 2293-2295).

The Church has long supported the donation of bodies for scientific research and educational purposes as long as the bodies are treated with dignity and are not displayed for entertainment purposes or for profit alone. It is also critical that whenever possible, the previous permission of the deceased or family members has been obtained. However, the Church has agreed that bodies unclaimed for a length of time can be used for research.

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The Carnegie Science Center supplied documentation and affidavits assuring that the bodies were of those who had died from natural causes and had been deceased and unclaimed for no less than four years. In addition, the bodies will be returned to China at the proper time for cremation or internment.

The Diocese of Pittsburgh hopes that those who attend the Exhibit will be edified and humbled by the tremendous and intricate beauty of the human body. Hopefully, all who attend will be inspired to praise the Creator through this Exhibit and perhaps some will commit themselves to serve humanity through the cultivation of medical and scientific research.

Q: Are there any practical things I might do after seeing the Exhibit?

A: One very practical point the Exhibit can drive home is the need and responsibility of taking care of our bodies. Proper stewardship involves taking care of our bodies. Proper use of our bodies is one way that we cooperate with God in fulfilling our potential. If we are ill or unhealthy because of neglect, we are unjust toward our own bodily human nature.

By extension, those who have the responsibility for city planning and urban development should be true to the bodily nature of human beings by providing ample areas for walking, running and transportation, such as bikes, that

afford people the opportunity of not being overly dependent upon machines. On a more sublime level, Christians can be rightly proud of the respect they have traditionally afforded the human body, especially in death. We prayerfully ponder the urgency with which the first Christians sought to remove Christ's body from the cross, lest it be further posed and displayed for the amusement of the crowd. We recall the respect and dignity in our beautiful Funeral rites, in which the body is dressed, venerated, incensed, and blessed, and prayers are said in thanksgiving for the person who animated it.

If you would like to see how an authentic Catholic respect for the body is manifested, you may choose to volunteer or visit any of a number of Catholic hospitals, nursing homes, and rehabilitation institutes in our diocese. You will marvel at the respect shown to each patient and their bodies. They are covered, their modesty respected, and their bodily decline is treated with the utmost discretion. There you will see patients and their bodies nursed, cared for, loved and respected.

When you look into the eyes of any one of the thousands of patients who depend upon the compassionate care afforded in our diocesan facilities you will see gratitude, affection, and love. Then, when you see the respect and dignity given to the human body in these facilities perhaps you may better discern the purpose of your own body. Hopefully you will begin to realize that the human body is not meant merely for self-indulgence; rather God created the body to serve – the person, one another, the common good and, in and through these, ultimately God.

Invitation and Exhortation:

It is a traditional spiritual work of mercy to pray for the living and the dead. It cannot be forgotten that the bodies of those on display belonged to real people. Although they have left this world and are known only to God, it is possible we can benefit them by praying for the repose of their souls. We invite you to this act of mercy.

This is the traditional prayer of the Church for the dead.

Eternal rest, grant unto them, O Lord, and let perpetual light shine upon them. May the souls of the faithful departed through the mercy of God rest in peace. Amen.

Psalm 139:13-18

For it was you who created my being,
Knit me together in my mother's womb.
I thank you for the wonder of my being,
For the wonders of all your creation.

Already you knew my soul,
My body held no secret from you
When I was being fashioned in secret
And molded in the depths of the earth.

Your eyes saw all my actions,
They were all of them written in your book;
Every one of my days was decreed
Before one of them came into being.

Quick and Short Bibliography for further Reading:

Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC)

The Teaching of Christ

U.S. Catholic Catechism for Adults

Theology for Beginners-Frank Sheed

Fides et Ratio – Encyclical by Pope John Paul II

