

**Homily for the Fifth Sunday of Lent – Year C (Readings from Year A for 3rd Scrutiny)
April 3, 2022**

**Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception
Springfield, Illinois**

**†Most Reverend Thomas John Paprocki
Bishop of Springfield in Illinois**

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ:

In the Holy Land, pilgrims are able to visit the tomb of Lazarus. It lies in the West Bank town of al-Eizariya, the village called Bethany in the New Testament, approximately one and a half miles east of Jerusalem. According to a tradition dating back to the fourth century AD, this is the spot where Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead. The tomb lies inside a cave, which pilgrims access by working their way down steep, irregular stone steps. A favorite trick played by pilgrimage leaders is to get pilgrims who have managed to climb down to the floor of the cave to peer into the tomb, with its open hole in the stone wall, and have them all repeat at full voice the words of Jesus: “Lazarus, come out!” Unbeknown to the pilgrims, someone is waiting behind the wall, and when the pilgrims shout for Lazarus to come out, the person emerges out of the dark – often accompanied by the screams

of terrified pilgrims, frightened out of their wits by this unexpected piece of theatre.

If pilgrims are petrified and astounded by having an actor walk out of the tomb of Lazarus, imagine how it would have been in the time of Jesus for people to see the real Lazarus suddenly emerge from his tomb after four days. It is curious that Jesus waited until He knew Lazarus was dead before going to Bethany. One possibility is that there was a Jewish belief that the soul hovered near the body for three days after death, but by the fourth day, all hope of life was gone. So after four days, Lazarus really was dead.

Jesus himself is quite clear that this whole situation will lead to God's glory and the glory of the Son. He says repeatedly throughout this story that this great sign will lead people to faith – as it does for his disciples, for Martha and Mary, and for the people standing round the tomb. He wants them to believe that He is the one sent by the Father. Jesus explains to Martha that faith in Him is the only way to resurrection and life. Then the story concludes by telling us that many of the people who witnessed this miracle did in fact come to believe in Him. Before coming to this belief, however, it takes people a long time to understand what Jesus is saying.

Both Martha and Mary, the sisters of Lazarus, show in their conversation with Jesus that they do not know who Jesus really is: that He is the giver of life. This lack of understanding causes Jesus to become perturbed to the point that he cries, as described in the brief verse, "And Jesus wept." Note that Jesus weeps not because he is sad over Lazarus' death. After all, He knows that He is going to raise Lazarus from the dead. Rather, Jesus is upset over the lack of understanding on the part of his good friends Martha and Mary.

Like Martha and Mary, many Christians today do not understand the Catholic Church's teaching about the resurrection from the dead. Our profession of faith, the Nicene Creed, which we recite on Sundays and Holy Days, concludes with the statement, "I look forward to the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come." Do we really understand what that means? Many people, including many Catholics, believe in eternal life, but wrongfully think this means that when we die, we will live forever as spirits, without any type of body. This is what the ancient Greeks believed, but it is not what Christians believe. Hence the growing popularity of cremation on the part of people who think that death means we simply discard our bodies since they will not be needed any more.

In this regard, a bill on human composting (HB 4552), introduced in the Illinois General Assembly by Rep. Kelly Cassidy (D-Chicago), passed the Energy and Environment Committee 23-0 on February 15th, but fortunately has not moved beyond the committee. The bill has 28 co-sponsors, which indicates a certain level of support, and environmental groups are supporting it. Colorado, Washington, and Oregon have approved similar legislation. HB 4552 authorizes a body to undergo human composting after death. The process known as “natural organic reduction” is an accelerated conversion of human remains to soil. The body is placed in a vessel that accelerates biological decomposition. The body is laid into the vessel onto a bed of wood, chips, alfalfa and straw. Over thirty days, everything inside the vessel breaks down to natural composition. Each body that completes the process creates one cubic yard of soil. The remains can then be used as compost, essentially serving as fertilizer for plants!

But the Church teaches that, “We firmly believe, and hence we hope that, just as Christ is truly risen from the dead and lives forever, so after death the righteous will live forever with the risen Christ and He will raise them up on the last day.”¹ Thus, “Although cremation is now permitted by the Church, it does not enjoy the same value as burial of the body. The

Church clearly prefers and urges that the body of the deceased be present for the funeral rites, since the presence of the human body better expresses the values which the Church affirms in those rites,"² most especially our belief that God will raise our bodies when Christ comes again on the last day.

Canon law says that, "Unless they gave some signs of repentance before death . . . , those who chose the cremation of their bodies for reasons contrary to Christian faith must be deprived of ecclesiastical funerals."³ Now, I have never heard of anyone explicitly saying that they choose cremation because they do not believe in the resurrection of the body, it does seem to be at least an implicit rejection of this dogma of our faith to turn one's remains into compost to serve as fertilizer to grow plants! While God certainly has the power to raise cremated ashes into the form of a glorified body, burial of the full body better expresses our belief that we look forward to the resurrection of the body.

This belief is clearly expressed in the Letter of Saint Paul to the Romans that we heard in today's second reading, which says, "If the Spirit of the one who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, the one who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also, through his Spirit

dwelling in you” (Rom 8:8-11). Saint Paul also wrote, “How can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead? But if there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ has not been raised; if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain. . . . But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep” (1 Cor 15:12-14).

Raising the dead to life is a sure sign of the presence and action of God. In the Book of the Prophet Ezekiel, which we heard in today’s first reading, the Lord says: “You shall know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves and have you rise from them, O my people” (Ezekiel 37:12-14).

Tradition tells us that Lazarus relocated to Larnaca in Cyprus after the resurrection of Jesus. The church in Larnaca claims to be the site of Lazarus’ second tomb – where they buried him when he finally did die. It is a place of real calm and peace. Surely when Lazarus faced death once more, he would have felt no fear. Jesus had already brought him back to life once. He knew that was just a sign of an even greater miracle: that Jesus would bring him to eternal life, bring him to the kingdom of his promise. We get a taste of that eternal life whenever we put our faith in Christ, when even in our driest, darkest or “deadest” and most hopeless of situations, we hear His

voice, just as the dead Lazarus did, and respond to His call. In our need, Jesus raises us to new life, unbinding us, letting us go free. Faith in Jesus Christ empowers us to live in true freedom: freedom from fear, freedom from the power of death, freedom to live by the Spirit which God has placed in us – the Spirit of the risen Christ.

May God give us this grace. Amen.

¹ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, n. 989.

² *The Order of Christian Funerals, Appendix on Cremation* (Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, 1997), n. 413.

³³ *Code of Canon Law*, Can. 1184 §1.