

Another of God's great mysteries

By Father Joseph Breighner

I was talking to a young lady who was studying for a big test in medical school. She had been cutting up cadavers in her class, and the test required that she be able to identify various veins and muscles. She said that the test was so difficult because various tissues look so different from different bodies.

Nonchalantly I asked her what was done with the body parts after they had been studied, and she replied: "Oh, they're put in the biohazardous waste material containers".

What? Biohazardous waste?

Aren't our bodies temples of the Holy Spirit? Don't our bodies share in the dignity of being made in the image and likeness of God? Didn't human flesh take on special dignity when the "Word became flesh and dwelt among us?" How did we get to become just waste, and toxic waste at that?

The answer, of course, to the first three questions above is yes. Our bodies do have special dignity. And, yes, we believe in the resurrection of the body. So how does God put our bodies back together again at the resurrection of the dead? My humble theological answer is: "That's God's problem!" I don't know. Let go and let God is a fundamental rule in the spiritual life - letting go of our little egos so that God can run our lives. Obviously, let go and let God is fundamental to the resurrection. When we "let go" at the hour of death, we literally let God take care of the rest.

Should we still donate our bodies to science, to the Anatomy Board? I think we can. My good friend, the late Olive Murdy, was one of the most practical and least sentimental individuals I had ever known. She donated her body to the Anatomy Board. When people would question her decision, she would always reply: "So

what's so great about rotting away in a box?"

Truth be told, we will all disappear physically. Whether we become part of hazardous waste that will be cremated, or whether our bodies decompose, and become part of the earth, virtually all that we are physically will disappear.

In the past, the church condemned cremation because it was often seen as a denial of the resurrection. The church no longer condemns cremation. When I answer that frequently asked question about cremation, my light-hearted reply is: "The Catholic Church believes everyone has the right to make an ash out of themselves!"

But how do waste and ashes and dust fit into resurrection? Again, I'm humbled. It's a mystery I yield to God. But remember the resurrected body of Jesus was quite different from his crucified body. The great scripture scholar, Father Ray Brown, once said in class that the flogging of Jesus was probably so severe that the body on the cross probably resembled a piece of meat hanging in a butcher shop more than it did a human body. And, again, remember, that while it was indeed the body of Jesus that came out of the tomb, it was different in appearance. Such an intimate friend as Mary Magdalen did not recognize Jesus at first. The apostles on the road to Emmaus did not recognize the risen Lord.

We believe that the resurrected body of Jesus was a "glorified" body. Our bodies will be similarly transformed and glorified. I'll leave the "how" to God. I simply bring faith and trust.

The fact that all of our bodies will disintegrate puts into perspective the amount of time we spend anointing our bodies with "potions and lotions." Being anointed by the Holy Spirit is a better investment!