



OFFICE OF THE ARCHBISHOP
The Catholic Archdiocese of Edmonton
8421-101 Avenue
Edmonton, AB Canada T6A 0L1
T (780) 469-1010
F (780) 465-3003
E chancery@edmontoncatholic-church.com

Українська католицька едмонтонська
єпархія
Ukrainian Catholic Eparchy of Edmonton
9546-108 Avenue
EDMONTON, AB CANADA T5H 1A3
T (780) 424-5496
F (780) 425-2330
E chancery@edmontoneparchy.com

Pastoral Statement on the *Body Worlds* Exhibit at Telus World of Science

The Telus World of Science will soon be hosting an exhibit entitled *Body Worlds*. The creation of Gunther von Hagen of Germany, *Body Worlds* is a display of human bodies and body parts that have been preserved by a process called “plastination.” Its stated goal is public education with respect to health and anatomy. Not surprisingly, this exhibit generates much debate wherever it occurs, and so it should. At issue here is human dignity. Thus, we wish to remind our Catholic people of important principles of our faith concerning the dignity of the human body as they consider viewing this display of bodies of the deceased.

According to Christian faith, the human body is not insignificant. It is precisely through the body – our gestures, facial expressions etc. – that we communicate our thoughts and emotions and relate with other persons. The body is part of God’s creative design of the human person. God has also made the human body the instrument by which He has saved us. In the Incarnation of His Son, Jesus Christ, God assumed a human body. God did not merely take on human appearance. The bodily Resurrection of Jesus from the dead is the foundation of our hope that, by His power, our bodies, too, will be raised up on the last day. (cf. *1 Corinthians* 15) Indeed, we proclaim our faith in the resurrection of the body every time we profess the Creed. Since the redemption of the human person, both body and soul, is the object of God’s saving plan in Christ, the human body retains its dignity even in death.

We offer the following points for consideration:

Was there full and informed consent by those who donated their bodies? Exhibit officials have assured us that such consent has been given and properly documented. Although the Catholic Church does not object to the donation of the body for the purpose of medical and scientific research, nevertheless we presume that such donation is for a *limited time* and that the body’s disposition will be handled *reverently* in such a way as to allow for any desired funeral rituals. Here we encounter a difficulty with the *Body Worlds* exhibit. To our knowledge, the bodies are preserved and used indefinitely. Christian faith insists upon the reverent burial of the body of the deceased in anticipation of its resurrection on the last day.

For the creators of *Body Worlds*, educational purposes require displaying bodies in various poses. It is precisely here, however, that an important line risks being crossed. Do the bodies, in this manner of display, become the “creation” of Gunther von Hagen and his colleagues? Are they presented as such? Does the exhibit, in fact, move from science to art? The human body is God’s handiwork, not ours. For this reason we should be familiar with it and honour it. For this very same reason, however, it should never be considered the creation of another person, much less presented as such.

The bodies will be displayed with the skin removed. Among other reasons, this is purportedly to protect the anonymity of the donor. Yet does this not obscure the individuality of these persons on display? These people are not just some anonymous “other” within the mass of humanity. As Pope Benedict XVI has so beautifully written, “Each of us is the result of a thought of God.” If any Catholics were to visit this exhibit, they should keep in mind that each body viewed is that of a unique individual loved by God and others. It would be appropriate to offer prayer for the repose of their souls.

Whether or not children visit this exhibit is a parental decision. We have conferred with the superintendents of the Catholic schools in our dioceses, and determined that any visits arranged to *Body Worlds* will be limited to high school students who have permission from their parents and for whom the exhibit would be related to a particular course of study. Before any such visit takes place, the students are to be prepared by qualified high school staff, who will review with them the principles and questions we have highlighted in this statement. Furthermore, the students must be helped after the visit to discuss and reflect upon the experience in the light of Catholic teaching.

We are not convinced that this display of real bodies is necessary for the educational aims it claims to pursue. Models should suffice.

We counsel any of our parishioners who choose to view the exhibit to do so critically through the lens of faith.



Most Reverend Richard Smith
Archbishop of Edmonton



Most Reverend David Motiuk
Bishop of the Ukrainian Eparchy of Edmonton

May 2008