

BODY WORLDS

Introduction

Beginning February 7, 2014 the Milwaukee Public Museum will be hosting the BODY WORLDS exhibition. This exhibition is the result of the work of a German anatomist, Gunther von Hagens, and uses a technique called “plastination.” Donated post-mortem human bodies are used for this exhibition. Von Hagens claims that people gave consent for the use of their bodies and that they are used for “educational and instructional purposes.” BODY WORLDS was first exhibited in 1998 in Mannheim, Germany and has been touring in the United States a little more than three years.

The BODY WORLDS exhibition has been a source of debate because of the donation of human bodies, the process used in preserving the bodies, the way the bodies are displayed in this exhibit, and the uncertainty about what becomes of the bodies after the exhibit. The plastination process removes the skin, fatty tissues, and connective tissues from the bodies. A silicone rubber is infused into the remaining tissues and bones and penetrates and preserves all of the cells. The bodies are shaped and formed into various positions for the exhibition. Some bodies are deep frozen and then cut into slices of 2 to 8 mm (1/12 to 1/3 inches) in thickness and treated with a polyester or epoxy resin. These sheets of body structures are displayed to show the inner workings of the body.

It is important for us as Catholic Christians to consider the moral and spiritual issues raised by the BODY WORLDS exhibition. It is also necessary for us to develop a well-formed conscience regarding this exhibit. This reflection paper will discuss the respect we must have for the human body both while the person is alive as well as after the person is dead, the plastination of babies as well as of adults, the profit this exhibit generates, children viewing the exhibition, the question of its potential value as education and/or art, what is meant by “informed consent,” and recommendations regarding how to deal with the BODY WORLDS exhibition.

I. MORAL AND SPIRITUAL CONCERNS

a) Human body and animal bodies

We read in Psalm 8:5-10, “What are humans that you are mindful of them, mere mortals that you care for them? Yet you have made them little less than a god, crowned them with glory and honor. You have given them the rule over the works of your hands, put all things at their feet: all sheep and oxen, even the beasts of the field. The birds of the air, the fish of the sea, and whatever swims the path of the seas. O Lord, our Lord, how awesome is your name through all the earth.”

The human person has a privileged place in the Creation. According to the whole Christian tradition grounded in the Bible, human beings are the only ones created in the image and

likeness of God (cf. *Gn.* 1:26-27), “able to know and love his Creator” (*Gaudium et spes*, 12). No other creature shares that dignity.

“The human person, created in the image of God, is at once corporeal and spiritual” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 362). Body and soul exist united as one in the human person, and both, body and soul, “share the dignity of the image of God” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 364).

Consequently, the human body is not the animal part of the person. It is the earthly and temporal self-expression of the person who is created in the image and likeness of God. In God’s world, therefore, we are to honor the dignity of that person not only during her or his earthly life, but also after death, because even after death the formed body continues to “speak” the person of the one whose body it was in such a way that a real human body, even dead, remains sacramental of God in its unique way.

The BODY WORLDS exhibition presents plastinated human bodies next to plastinated bodies of animals. The colors look the same, the muscles, the nerves, the bones are somehow similar. At a scientific or even at an empirical level, most people could distinguish human bodies from animal bodies. However, at a symbolic and spiritual level, the insinuation of comparative equality remains in the conscience of the visitor and may take away from the respect and dignity the Catholic Church teaches regarding human beings.

The Church is fully committed to the formation of conscience of all the faithful (cf. *Gaudium et spes*, 16). That is why the Church proclaims the distinction and infinite superiority of human beings to animals (cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2417-18).

b) Respect and love for the person who died

The virtue of justice requires that we accord to everyone what is their due. Recognizing and honoring “what belongs to each person” is what we call respect. However, Christ’s invitation goes beyond mere justice. In the parable of the Good Samaritan (cf. *Lk.* 10:29-37), for example, Jesus invites us to not only give to others what belongs to them, but even what we might think belongs only to us. Indeed, we are to give not only what is “ours” but even ourselves along with it. This ultimately is the meaning of love.

We Catholics *respect* and *love* the human person not only during her or his earthly life, but also in their hope of a new and eternal life. From a natural point of view, death is the end of earthly life. However, for Catholics, physical death is not the “end,” but the beginning of a transformed life: “Lord for your faithful people life is changed, not ended. When the body of our earthy dwelling lies in death we gain an everlasting place in heaven” (*Roman Missal*, Preface of Christian Death I).

In our tradition, then, we are called to show *respect* and *love* for the person who has died by treating his or her body “with respect and charity, in faith and hope of the resurrection” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2300). The way we treat the body of the deceased must show our faith-based hope in God (cf. *Spe salvi*, 2-4), who once made that body His temple.

Another aspect of the respect for the human body is an empirical one. Being the expression of the person, our bodies “speak,” “communicate” the person. For example, when touching the cadaver of a loved one, we know we are not touching the person; however there is a sense of respect and honor for the person, which that body “communicates.”

The BODY WORLDS exhibition presents challenges to the sacredness and respect of how we treat human bodies after death. Exposing naked plastinated bodies and posing human bodies “playing chess” or “riding a horse” or “dancing” or “skate boarding,” brings uncertainty to the type of respect and charity we are committed to offer to the human body and for the person whose body is being exposed. An article published by the British Medical Journal reported that Von Hagens’ future plans include “displaying corpses as though in the act of sex”¹.

c) The risk of materialism

The Church celebrates the contributions of modern science in discovering and proving more accurate information and education about our human nature (cf. *Gaudium et spes*, 44b). However, it is important to mention that, in the context of modern science, there is the risk of materialism. The scientific method consists in measuring and experimenting, and it is obvious that we can only *measure* and *experiment* with the material part of things.

The BODY WORLDS exhibition opens human bodies and exposes the interior parts of those bodies, revealing the bodily interior of the matter; matter that even though is human it does not look human, but “plastic.”

Besides learning the actual features of internal human organs, the unprepared visitor may also find a deep sense of emptiness: plastinated bodies that show no trace of God’s “breath of life” (Gn. 2:7).

To this sense of emptiness we may add the suspicion of considerable profit gained by someone from freely donated bodies. The attraction of cash profits may even override other genuine goals and concerns of this exhibit.

d) Care for the little ones

Disturbing or scandalizing the “little ones” is condemned in the Sacred Scriptures. To the one who scandalizes, Luke stated that “it would be better for him if a millstone were put around his neck and he be thrown into the sea” (Lk. 17:2). Human sciences have also demonstrated how the mind develops and the need to consider the person’s level of understanding in the educational process of children.

¹ D. SINGH, “Gunther von Hagens’ Body Worlds exhibition has left London to move to Munich. Debashis Singh talked to the German anatomist about consent and controversy”, in www.bmj.com/cgi/content/full/326/7387/468.

The BODY WORLDS exhibition presents plastinated human bodies in a way that may be disturbing for a child. Some adults who have visited this exhibit in other cities have suggested that even for them the exhibit caused some confusion.

Even though the admission of a child requires the company of an adult, the appropriate preparation of the adult in dealing with the impressions of the child remains as an unanswered question.

e) Plastinated babies

The Church firmly states that abortion is an abominable crime (cf. *Evangelium vitae*, 58). The BODY WORLDS exhibition presents a number of plastinated fetuses with the purpose of educating the audience on the prenatal development process of the unborn child.

Where did these babies come from? Is the money I paid for the admission to this exhibit contributing to this plastination enterprise that may include and, who knows, support abortion? These questions find no answer in the BODY WORLDS exhibition itself. We know that those babies have died and have been donated by an adult who somehow is related to those babies; however, the question of the cause of death of those fetuses is not answered.

Studying prenatal development of the human body from fetuses whose origins are unknown places the conscience in a dilemma: should I just ignore those questions or should I find out and get the answers? The minute those questions are heard in the “inner core,” our conscience, we are obliged to get the answers. Unfortunately, we have not been able to find those answers in the exhibition or in the information provided by BODY WORLDS.

f) Education vs. Art

The Catholic Church not only approves but also describes as *meritorious* and *heroic* the donation of human bodies or organs from cadavers for morally admissible purposes (cf. *Evangelium vitae*, 86; *Charter for Health Care Workers*, 72-76). Among those purposes, are the progress of science, the life-giving donation of organs or tissue from cadavers, and the education of those in health care professions.

To make those purposes *morally admissible*, the process of donation must meet the following conditions²:

- The remains are not to be used in a disrespectful manner;
- There is an educational, spiritual or inspirational end being realized by the use of the remains;
- There were no indications by the individuals or their relatives explicitly stating that they did not want the remains to be used in this public service;
- The death of the individual was not intentionally caused in order to procure the body, the organs or the tissues.

² Cf. T. PACHOLCZYK, “Bodies in Plastic”, in: www.catholiceducation.org/links/jump.cgi?ID=4986.

The BODY WORLDS exhibition pursues an educational goal. Such a goal, considered by itself, presents a good and morally *admissible intention*.

To reach this goal, the creator of this exhibit uses a method: the plastination of human bodies. This technique allows the meticulous preservation of entire bodies as well as dissected anatomical specimens. Considering that the process of plastination of human bodies could be done according to the conditions previously mentioned, we may conclude that the technique is not by itself immoral. Hospitals and universities may use this technique to better teach its students or for research purposes.

The challenge is that the educational goal of this exhibit is deeply intermingled with artistic and consumerist purposes. These dual goals are accomplished by transferring preserved human bodies from hospitals and universities to the museum, from healthcare students and researchers to the general population, from prepared adult audience to the possibility of an unprepared child or teenager, from human bodies laying in a respectful manner to human bodies posing in “creative ways,” evoking the works of Da Vinci and Rembrandt. In these situations, it appears that the “artist” is using the body for artistic purposes.

The fascination of this exhibit may not override the question about its purpose: Does education take the back seat? Does the real experience of this exhibit show an educational purpose or a voyeuristic opportunity to see the manipulation of human bodies for the author’s artistic justification?

g) Informed consent and “informed consents”

As we have previously said, the donation of human bodies, organs or tissue for morally admissible purposes is *meritorious* and *heroic*. However, such a donation must come with the informed consent of the donor.

BODY WORLDS requires an informed consent of the person who wishes to donate his or her body to be used for this plastination enterprise. The thousands of people who have already signed such “informed consent” around the world had the chance to learn about the BODY WORLDS exhibition and the plastination technique. The donor is also given the chance to choose how he or she wants his or her body to be exhibited. The donation of human bodies is done within a legal context.

According to our Catholic tradition, however, the legality of an action does not always justify its morality. For example, even if abortion be licit in some countries, we firmly state its immorality. Not everything that is legal is moral and not everything that is moral is legal.

What is questionable in the donation of human bodies is not the “informed consent” process, but the type of information provided. BODY WORLDS cannot be blamed for not informing its donors about its purpose. However, what is missing in that document is the information about the value of the human body in light of God’s plan, and the moral principles that help us to support our choices.

There is another important and complicated issue regarding the consent. Before any consent, there is the risk of being before a “blind conscience” (cf. *Gaudium et spes*, 16) or erroneous conscience. For example, someone may donate his or her body for plastination for fear to be buried or as an eccentric way to express anger. In this case, even though the “consent document” informs about the “noble” educational purpose of this exhibit and the process of plastination, the donor is not given the chance to deal with a particular spiritual or emotional issue. For that particular person, the educational goal of the exhibit is meaningless.

Having said this, we can understand why not everything we “consent” to is morally right. Dr. Von Hagens, for example, may receive the consent of a donor who wishes not to be identified, and as result we have human bodies that became “sculptures,” not with the name of the person, but with person-less names such as “Thinker,” “Skateboarder,” or “Skin Man.”³ If the donor had the chance to receive the formation and information about the value of the human person, the result might have been different.

This is certainly a broader issue that reaches the dimensions of our postmodern society. The Church is not indifferent to this situation, to the need of forming and informing the conscience of every person, and that is why we have written this statement.

II. SOME RECOMMENDATIONS

The BODY WORLDS exhibit presents more questions than answers. That is why we recommend the following:

- Make this an opportunity to pray for forgiveness for the many ways we may act against the dignity of human beings and the deceased, and for an end to the many forms of violence and injustice against the human body.
- Make this an opportunity to learn more about the nature of the human person, a profound unity of body and soul, according to our Catholic faith.
- Make this an opportunity to learn more about the value of the human body in the context of our faith.
- Get the necessary information, reflection and consultation before you allow your children to participate in a school field trip to this exhibit.
- Be mindful of the preparation and psychological development of the person, especially of children and teenagers.
- Get more information about the BODY WORLDS exhibition and other similar exhibits.
- If you choose to attend this exhibition, share your impressions with others in a faith context setting.

³ Cf. M. KNEUSEL, “Body Worlds and the Culture of Death”, in: www.gachristianalliance.org/news/body_worlds2.htm

When Saint Paul faced the question about eating the meat of sacrificed animals to pagan idols, he answered, “Now food will not bring us closer to God. We are not worse off if we do not eat, nor are we better off if we do. But make sure that this liberty of yours in no way becomes a stumbling block to the weak... Therefore, if food causes my brother to sin, I will never eat meat again, so that I may not cause my brother to sin” (1Cor. 8:8-9.13). Following St. Paul’s recommendation, we do not only appreciate the appropriate formation of our conscience regarding the human body, but we are called to be vigilant of not causing scandal for those who are still searching for answers.