

## FEATURES OF THIS WEEK'S ISSUE

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## MESSAGE OF POPE LEO XIII TO THE "N.Z. TABLET."

*Pergant Directores et Scriptores New Zealand Tablet, Apostolica Benedictione confortati, Religionis et Justitiae causam promoveri per vias Veritatis et Pacis.*

LEO XIII, P.M.

Die 4 Aprilis, 1900.

TRANSLATION.—Fortified by the Apostolic Blessing, let the Directors and Writers of the *New Zealand Tablet* continue to promote the cause of Religion and Justice by the ways of Truth and Peace.

April 4, 1900.

LEO XIII., Pope.

## The New Zealand Tablet

WEDNESDAY, MARCH 25, 1925.

### THE CREMATORIUM PROPOSAL

AS we intimated last week, a small coterie of cremationists are trying to persuade the Dunedin City Council to waste public money in erecting a crematorium in this city. The attempt should be opposed vigorously, not only by Catholics who are bound to submit to the ruling of the Church against cremation, but also by those non-Catholics who believe that public money should not be spent in frivolous or unwarranted enterprises. The deputation that waited upon the Council on behalf of the cremationists sought to scare away opposition by hinting that infantile paralysis came possibly from cemeteries; and then the speakers proceeded to build their case upon a number of bald assertions calculated to deceive those who heard or read them. During the week we took the opportunity of consulting medical authorities upon the question of cremation, and we find that the assertions of the cremationists are altogether lacking in evidence to bear them out.

We find that the deputation's evidence of the connection of cemeteries with the outbreak of disease is regarded as weak and unconvincing. No evil results from the conditions enforced in modern well-regulated cemeteries; and further, no epidemics have been traced to cemeteries. If cemeteries were the menace to public health, which the cremationists would have us believe they are, is it not strange that the local Government Boards and the Ministry of Public Health in Britain are silent on the question of cremation? There is no recorded well-authenticated case of outbreak of disease due to water contaminated by the drainage of a graveyard; and medical opinion testifies that there is no ground for supposing that the emanations from grave-

yard soil are dangerous to health. If they were, their effect would be most marked among grave-diggers, a class who, like the workers in sewers, are obstinately healthy in spite of all *a priori* reasoning to the contrary.

It is only fair to say that medical men have no doubt that our present system of deep burial is inconsistent with the rapid and efficient solution of the bodies we consign to earth; for, if corpses are covered by a foot of suitable earth, the perishable parts disappear inoffensively within a year. The earth is said to be the great natural solvent and disinfectant of all forms of dead organic matter deposited below the surface; but it is very much more active as a destructive and purifying agent in the upper layers not exceeding five feet from the surface than it is in greater depths. The method of earth burial, as it is practised at present with the use of lead shells and strong wood coffins, preserves the bodies for a very long period. Doctors say that nothing is gained by this lengthy preservation, and that the aim of earth burial should be to facilitate the ultimate reduction of the body into its component elements. To this end eminent authorities advocate that the body should be placed in an easily perishable coffin of wickerwork, light unprepared wood, or papier mache. The objects of the most suitable type of earth burial are said to be further frustrated by the "use of brick graves, vaults, and heavy oak or metallic coffins. All these are objectionable, illogical, and futile attempts to prevent decomposition." The top of the grave should be a mound of earth capable of supporting a fairly luxuriant growth of vegetation, which assists in draining the soil and makes use of the products of decay. The foregoing considerations, however, must not be read as reasons in support of cremation. They are merely improvements in the method of earth burial suggested by men who stand high in medical science. The important point to keep in mind always is that cemeteries have never been known to breed disease, and earth burial has been the custom long enough to have given the medical scientists ample opportunity of making up their minds about it.

While no reasonable objection can be raised against cemeteries, there is one very serious objection to cremation. The objection is "the impossibility of exhumation increases the facilities for concealing homicide." This point was dealt with very gingerly by a member of the deputation. He referred to the objection in passing, and then pushed it aside with the remark that one of our Supreme Court judges did not attach much importance to it. We have yet to learn that a Supreme Court judge, excellent legal authority though he may be, can claim to be accepted as an authority upon medical science in preference to men who have been highly trained in that science. The opinion of the Supreme Court judge in question is flatly contradicted by eminent medical authorities; and medical opinion on this important point is so ably expressed by Notter and Firth in *The Theory and Practice of Hygiene* that we quote their authoritative statement in full. After stating that there

has been little attempt to use burial grounds by cultivation, they proceed as follows:—

"The second objection is, however, more serious, and cannot be regarded as satisfactorily met by the proposal for minute and detailed autopsy in every case. In our opinion, such a procedure is quite impracticable; even if it were feasible, the discovery of organic disease would not exclude necessarily the possibility of foul play. The discovery of a few poisons, such as copper, might be detected in the ashes, but all organic and volatile mineral poisons would be dissipated by cremation. It is true, exclamation is rarely required, but the possibility of it undoubtedly checks crime."

That opinion ought to carry considerably more weight than the views of a man who is not a doctor.

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From the point of view of non-Catholic ratepayers the crematorium is a foolish proposition. Although nothing has been proved against the present burial system, the ratepayers and rentpayers are asked to burden themselves with a large expenditure in order to establish a thing for which there is no need and no general demand. The cremationists assert that their method is more hygienic than the one in vogue. We have seen that they cannot prove this; and even if they could, as long as cremation rested on a voluntary basis the cemeteries would remain, and whatever of evil they hold would be continued even if the city were full of crematoria. At the very outset, therefore, the case for voluntary cremation falls to the ground. We are sure no one will object to the erection of a crematorium provided that the cremationists pay for it themselves or at least do not seek to make it a charge upon the city's finances. Catholics, of course, will oppose the movement strenuously. The Church forbids them to use the crematorium. The time is opportune for them to tell the Council that they have the very strongest of objections to paying for it.

### DOES FAMINE MENACE IRELAND?

The Dublin correspondent of the *Edinburgh Catholic Herald*, writing to his journal during February, says:—

For months past the question of destitution and distress in the West has presented a very serious problem for the Government and for the philanthropically-minded of our citizens. For months past the Local Government Department, the Department of Agriculture, and its sub-Department the Land Commission, have done herculean work in a quiet way to cope with the situation brought about by two wet seasons, the agricultural slump and the failure of the fishery industry. It is not too much to say that in the past three months more has been done under a native Government to avert what threatened to be a real famine than was done by the old English Government in a score of years. The Land Commission Inspectors are working in every part of the affected area. The land is being stripped and building operations have been started to provide houses for the new occupiers, most of whom will be in possession of their new

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