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Bury the Dead

by Michael Sean Winters

Distinctly Catholic

One of the corporal works of mercy is: Bury the Dead. My colleague John Allen has a report on a discussion in Rome about whether or not a Nazi war criminal, who never repented his actions - and, indeed, continued to deny the Holocaust even in a statement issued after his death! - should be given a Catholic funeral. The answer is not an easy one, but it is inescapable: Yes, this man should receive a Catholic funeral if that is what his family wants. We do not know what happens to a person as their death draws near, even at the last instant they may repent. In any event, we should leave judgment to God. I take a backseat to no one in my concern about Catholic-Jewish relations, and I am sure that many Jews - and Italians for that matter because this now dead Nazi killed dozens of them too - will be deeply upset to see a Catholic funeral for a man who committed such evil. But, no one can gainsay the limits of God's mercy. We all live in hope that our sins will be forgiven and while few of us have such grave sins, and such public sins, let no Catholic ever claim that God's mercy is not greater than any human sinfulness. We must all live with the consciousness of Hell and eternal damnation but we must also live with the hope that Hell is empty.

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