

Bone chapels and their strange art

In catacombs, crypts, and ossuaries, I've seen the ugliness of death transformed into something beautiful.

by [Lanta Davis](#) in the [November 2024](#) issue

Published on October 28, 2024



The Sedlec Ossuary, beneath the Cemetery Church of All Saints, in the Czech Republic (Pedro Krtička / Creative Commons)

Death hovers above my head. Scythe in one hand and scales in the other, he stares down at me. Skeletons greet me, bowing their heads and imploring me to pray. There are bones before me, bones behind me, bones above me. Some of those bones even take flight. A few of them gather into the shape of an hourglass. My

time, it seems, is almost up.

This encounter was no mere dream, no prophetic vision. I saw death—and it forever changed how I saw my life.

After exploring a few churches in Rome, I'd seen a fair share of tombs and relics, even an occasional body. But nothing could prepare me for what I saw in Santa Maria della Concezione dei Cappuccini. The church, built for a Franciscan order of monks called the Capuchins, is fairly standard: an altar, pews, paintings adorning the walls. In the Capuchin Crypt, however, six small chapels feature an entirely different kind of art.

Before I entered the first chapel, a sign warned: "What you are now we used to be; what we are you will be." I crossed the threshold to find death waiting for me, his scythe ready to cut me down, his scales prepared to find me wanting. Skeletons watched from walls adorned with arches, garland, stars, and rosettes made from vertebrae, shoulder blades, ribs, and pelvic bones. Two skeletons in brown tunics lounged in beds made from stacked femurs and skulls, and two more held winged hourglasses.

In the six rooms in this tunnel of death, I would discover newly sprung flowers, eight-pointed stars, clocks and crosses, and a dazzling array of circles, swirls, and chandeliers. Large, arched backgrounds reminded me of canopies at weddings and graduations—made from rows of skulls and layered pelvic bones instead of balloons or flowers.

Standing among the bones, I was deeply unsettled. Part of me yearned to run through all six rooms as quickly as possible so that I could get back to the warm, bright sun of the land of the living. Instead, I found myself lingering among the dead. Once I got past the initial shock, I had to admit: these bone chapels, while eerie, were undeniably beautiful.

The experience has lingered. Death followed me home to swing its scythe. Now, when I think of skulls and bones, it's no longer an objective exercise, because now, when I think of dead bodies, I think about my mother's.

Contemplating the reality of a body I'd hugged and kissed and loved—and that had carried my own body into existence—becoming bones made me think more deeply

about the bone chapels. I'd mostly thought about death as something so horrible we hide it. We cover bare earth with turf, coffins with flowers, the harsh pain of loss with "celebrations of life." But in the Capuchin Crypt, death wasn't hidden away. It was on full display. Here, in this strange series of rooms with names like the Crypt of Pelvises and the Crypt of Shin Bones and Thigh Bones, death became art.

This strange, skull- and skeleton-filled place made me wonder: Could the ugliness of death be transformed into something beautiful?

The bone installations at the Capuchin Crypt are not the work of some avant-garde modern artist trying to shock and horrify. They are the devotional labor of a 17th-century monk. When the Capuchin order moved to its new location in Rome, the monks carried their dead with them. Father Michael of Bergamo oversaw the design of the crypt, where the remains of nearly 4,000 of his monastic brothers were carefully arranged into the jarring, delicate designs we still see today.

I never imagined I'd walk through a room called the Crypt of the Three Skeletons anywhere other than a haunted house. I definitely didn't think I'd find bone rosettes and bone chandeliers decorating a holy place. But the Capuchin Crypt's bone art is not that unusual.

Below the beautifully designed streets of Paris are beautifully designed streets of death, where miles upon miles of bones have been stacked against the walls of underground tunnels known as the Paris Catacombs. When the city's cemeteries began to run out of room, they moved the bones underground. Rather than simply pack them in, the bones were artfully arranged. Long bones, such as femurs, were stacked about ten high, followed by a row of skulls, followed by ten more rows of femurs, and so on. Here, death is put into order.

Ossuaries like these are essentially storehouses for bones, but not all ossuaries are simply a matter of utility. When Father Michael of Bergamo oversaw the Capuchin Crypt, he created a sacred space, one that honored the dead and offered a space of contemplation and worship for the living. He was neither the first nor the last to do so. Ossuaries across the world have been turned into places for worship and the bones of the dead into sacred art.

In Milan's San Bernardino alle Ossa, a double row of skulls forms a cross with an astonishingly beautiful design. Skeletons scattered across Germany wear ornate,

bejeweled regalia; believed to be martyrs and saints from the Christian catacombs, they are dressed to honor their status in the Christian afterlife. The ossuary chapel in the Cathedral of Otranto displays the bones of the martyrs who were killed inside that very church, seeking shelter during an Ottoman siege. In the Czech Republic's Sedlec Ossuary, an eight-foot chandelier constructed out of every bone of the human body dangles nearby a skull garland and a noble family's coat of arms, which is also made entirely from bones. An ossuary in Melnik features skulls that spell out *Ecce Mors*: Behold Death. And that's just to name a few.

But what is all this bone art about? A room in which you are surrounded by bones certainly doesn't seem like a natural place of worship. It might even feel sacrilegious rather than sacred. So how—and why—is this form of art so prominent in the historic Christian church? If we walk with the dead and gaze carefully at their bones, the art of death helps interpret itself.

In the Capuchin Crypt, four of the six chapels are named after bones: along with the Crypt of Pelvises and the Crypt of Shin Bones and Thigh Bones there's the Crypt of the Three Skeletons and the Crypt of Skulls. But the last two rooms are called the Mass Chapel and the Crypt of the Resurrection.

The Mass Chapel reminds us that the art of death in bone chapels echoes the ritual of death in the Eucharist. The strangeness of unburying bodies and rearranging death into surprising, beautiful forms expresses in art what the Eucharist professes in practice.

When I really think about it, celebrating the Eucharist is as eerie and disorienting as walking through several rooms decorated with bones. We eat the broken body. We drink the shed blood. The significance of this act is not something to take lightly. The Eucharist may be a ritual of resurrection, but it first grapples with the reality of death. During communion, you're not even just looking at death: you're consuming it. The idea of eating the body of Christ sounded so strange to ancient Romans that early Christians were accused of cannibalism.

Traditionally, altars could only be consecrated if they contained, or were built on top of, martyrs' or saints' bodies. Not only would Christians eat the body of Christ, they would do so at a table that is also a tombstone, built on the bodies of other Christians. The Mass Chapel is the only room in the Capuchin Crypt without bones on the walls, but there are still bones and bodies *in* its walls.

The way to life, the Eucharist teaches us, requires crossing through death. Jesus does not wave his hand and eliminate death; he defeats death by dying. In one bone chapel, at the Church of Saint Bartholomew in Kolín, Czech Republic, thousands of bones and skulls support a massive crucifix. Jesus, dying on the cross, is surrounded by death. This haunting design depicts a theology of the crucifixion. Skull symbolism, such as the skull that traditionally rests at the foot of the cross in images of the crucifixion, refers in part to Golgotha, “the place of the skull” (Matt. 27:33). The crucifixion defeats not Jesus, but death itself. Skulls at the crucifixion are a sign of Christ’s triumph—and ours.

Adam and Eve introduced death when they ate from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil; Jesus conquered death by dying on a wooden tree. Jesus died on the cross. Jesus was buried. But death is not the end of the story. Resurrection is.

“I am going to open your graves and bring you up from them,” declares God in Ezekiel 37:12. Through Christ, death is but a pause. As John Donne writes, it is but “a short sleep” before we “wake eternally.” Christians even changed the word used for burial grounds from *necropolis* (the city of the dead) to *cemetery* (a place where people sleep).

In art depicting the last judgment, bodies and skeletons imitate Jesus’ journey by smashing through the stone slabs of their tombs and ascending to heaven. Dead bodies rising from their graves could be right out of a horror movie, but in Christianity the living dead signal a fulfilled promise, a happy ending.

The sequence of bone art in the Capuchin Crypt also culminates in the happy ending of the resurrection. As you walk through, the Crypt of the Resurrection immediately follows the Mass Chapel—a sequence that echoes the Eucharist’s promise that when we follow Jesus in death, we follow him in resurrection. The focal point of the Crypt of the Resurrection is a painting of Jesus resurrecting Lazarus, a reminder that Jesus saves more than just his own body from death.

The Capuchin Crypt and other bone chapels certainly ask us to gaze at our mortality. But they also invite us to grapple with the mysterious, beautiful promise of resurrection. The Capuchin Crypt is filled with signs and symbols of hope. The source of light, the bone chandelier, is in the center of an eight-pointed star. Baptismal fonts also traditionally have eight sides, to symbolize the “new day,” the death of the old and the birth of the new. The hourglasses teach us that time flies, but a clock

points us to eternal time. Even the image of Death, with his scales and scythe, is surrounded by an oval, a symbol of eternity and new birth.

The Capuchins are Franciscans, and St. Francis called death “our Sister Bodily Death.” Sister Death is not an enemy so much as a guide who ushers us through the threshold of a natural and necessary transition. A skull with butterfly wings (made from shoulder blades) is a visual reminder that our bodies will undergo a process similar to the caterpillar and the butterfly, with death but a transition to a more beautiful form. Yes, our bodies are destined to become bones. But the bone artists believed that through Christ, the bones they arranged on the walls are also destined to become bodies.

The artists behind the Capuchin Crypt, the Sedlec Ossuary, and the other bone chapels did their work knowing that it would not last, that their careful arrangements would be undone. They worked with the hope that those bones would not stay stacked on the floors or hanging on the walls. “Son of man, can these bones live?” the Lord asks Ezekiel, and in response, Ezekiel hears “a noise, a rattling sound,” and watches as “the bones came together, bone to bone.” Then “tendons and flesh appeared on them and skin covered them.” Eventually, what was dry bones “came to life” (Ezek. 37:3-10).

Those bones in the Capuchin Crypt, the resurrection promise declares, will rise again. The skeletons will speak, the bone chandeliers will disassemble and reassemble, and those shoulder-bone wings really will take flight. The thousands of broken bodies now stacked and arranged in delicate designs will one day rearrange, vertebrae realigning to skulls and femurs to pelvic bones, finding their way back together.

For now, the bones rest, quiet and still in their garlands, stacks, and shapes. But one day, they will rattle and move, transforming into their final art form: the resurrected body.

Bone chapels ask us to grapple with our mortality—and with the promise of resurrection.

When I first learned of the early church’s emphasis on bodies and bones, I was confused. I thought of my body as a temporary shell, a burden, an enemy. That Jesus rose again and ascended into heaven I could grasp; that my body, with all its

struggles and failures and limitations, was summoned to follow Jesus' journey was more difficult to comprehend.

But when my mother died, I finally understood the profound hope and beauty of the Christian belief in resurrected bodies. At the visitation, my brother brought his nine-year-old son to look into the coffin. "That's not really Grammy," my brother carefully explained. "It's just her body. She's not really there." I had a flashback to my mother saying something similar to me when I was eight years old and attending my grandfather's funeral. For years I misunderstood this and assumed that the bodies I saw in coffins were just fakes, mannequins of some kind.

It's easy to see why my mother and brother explained death the way they did, even beyond the simple goal of soothing children. There is something in the face of the dead that makes them seem not really there. They don't look quite themselves. Certainly the mother I saw in the coffin seemed wildly different from the mother I had known all my life.

But then there were her hands—with their long, piano-playing fingers, chewed-to-the-nub fingernails, and scattered sunspots—that were still so distinctly my mother's. I knew those hands would slowly lose their sunspots, their color, their distinctive my-mom-ness. One of the people I had known and loved most in this world would become bones, her cherished body decaying until it would be indistinguishable to me from a stranger's bones.

When I looked at my mother's hands, saying this body wasn't "really her" just didn't make sense to me. My mom was her body, and that body was good. I don't say that to diminish the soul. But I knew my mother in and through her body. Her body mattered. What happens to her body after death matters, too. I long for not just her spirit but for the particular body I loved, the long-fingered hands and strong arms that worked so hard and so lovingly, to rise again.

The understanding of the body's goodness—a goodness so powerful that God wants bodies to live eternally—is ultimately what I find so powerful, redemptive, and hopeful about the bone chapels. Their strange, disorienting art both imitates and awaits the work of Jesus, who takes our scattered and dusty bones, re-forms them, and transforms them into something beautiful.

Maybe gazing at the art of death will prepare me for the art of dying, so that one day, I'll see death as something so beautiful, I'll greet her as Sister.