Cryonics: A Catholic Viewpoint

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Cryonics is the practice of freezing a body immediately after death in the hope that in some distant future the body might be brought back to life. Organisations which offer this service charge tens of thousands of pounds for what is, in effect, the promise of earthly immortality, or at least, a second chance at earthly life. From a scientific perspective this is speculative in the extreme. Human embryos can be frozen and survive unharmed but this has not been done with any animal remotely the size of an adult human being. This is without considering the added problem that the body is not cryogenically frozen until after death has been determined. Even if the body could be preserved perfectly in this state, the person would still need to be somehow brought back from the dead.

From a Catholic theological perspective the attempt to find earthly immortality through technology is vain. It is a way to avoid acknowledging the reality of death. All material things pass away and if there is hope for everlasting life then this can only be found in One who is above and beyond this passing world. Freezing a body also gives no sense of finality or closure for those who are left behind, unlike burial or cremation and the respectful interment of ashes.¹

Spending money to freeze the human remains of a person helps neither that person nor anyone else. If one wishes to express hope in the good that can come from medical science it would be better to offer one’s body to organ donation, medical training or research of some genuinely useful kind. When done in a proper ethical fashion (there are potential issues here too of which donors should be aware²) the gift of the body offers the real hope of life after death, that is, life for others after one’s own death. Similarly, as well as remembering dependents and loved ones, giving money to charities is also a way for one’s good deeds to reach beyond death. From a Christian perspective, it is only the person who loses his or her life who finds it, and it is by thinking of others at the time of our death that we come closer to the One who made us and to Whom we will return.

¹ On the importance of respectful interment of ashes, see:
² On the ethics of organ transplantation see:
http://bioethics.org.uk/Ontheethicsoforgantransplantationfinal.pdf