

Catholic Cremains

WHAT HAS HAPPENED TO THE CREMATED REMAINS AT OUR LADY OF PERPETUAL HELP?

By David Ainsworth

Jan Thompson has been a Cottage Grove resident all her life, and she has been a member of Our Lady of Perpetual Help Catholic Church there for most of her life. She has held many roles at the church, including president of the Altar Society. When her husband, Gwen Thompson, died in 2005, his cremated remains were interred in the ossuary at the church's memorial gardens.

An ossuary is a place where the remains of dead people are kept. When she dies, Thompson, 84, planned to have her remains rest with her husband's at the ossuary.

That may not happen. Further, her husband's remains might be removed, if they haven't been already, by an ultra-conservative priest at the small church. The Catholic Church permitted cremation in 1963, but still frowns upon the practice. As Father John Boyle, OLPH's current priest, wrote in a church bulletin, "the Church does not promote cremation but rather permits it."

In the church bulletin dated Jan. 2, 2022, Boyle announced that there will be no further interment of cremated remains in the ossuary, and that the remains already there will be relocated somewhere else. He argued that the ossuary never should have been established and wrote that there "is no guarantee that this can be a permanent resting place since church buildings can be modified, rebuilt, relocated or even closed."

He closed with, "My prayer is that we can work together as a parish and with the families concerned, with as much sensitivity as possible, to find an appropriate and respectful solution so that our loved ones' remains may have a fitting final resting place."

Boyle declined to comment for this story. The Archdiocese of Portland, which the church is part of, did not respond to requests for comment as of press time.

Many families said Boyle has not been responsive to their requests, despite his statement in the church bulletin. At least 10 families have been affected by the decision to remove the ossuary.

"He's convinced that he knows that it has to be done this way or else," Thompson says.

This seems to break a promise from years earlier. In 2004, Thompson and another parishioner, Mary Lou Williams, wrote a letter to the Rev. Dennis O'Donovan, the then-vicar general of the Archdiocese of Portland, that the church was informed that the Memorial Garden ossuary is not in compliance with the rules of the Catholic Church and Archdiocese.

With space running out for one ossuary, Thompson and Williams requested to use a second or third ossuary as necessary. Father Rick Boyle (no relation to John Boyle), who was priest then for Our Lady of Perpetual Help, supported the change, and O'Donovan also approved of it in a letter. With that, it seemed that the remains would be safe from removal.

Now, nearly 20 years later, that does not seem to be the case. In fact, some of the remains may have already been removed.

Tim Corey is one of those family members affected. His parents were both cremated and their remains placed in the church's ossuary, and he is unsure whether his mother's remains have been disturbed. In fact, they may have been moved to the rectory, which is the priest's home, he says.

"I don't know whether my mother's remains have been taken out or not," Corey says. "There's no communication about the status on that end."

Other family members have expressed similar reactions.

"Very pissed off," says Peter Kessler, whose father's remains have been interred in Our Lady of Perpetual

Help's ossuary. "It shouldn't be disturbed ever again."

Corey adds that when families asked about this, they have not heard back from John Boyle or the Archdiocese of Portland. Essentially, they have not answered their questions about this. According to Corey, a letter in February 2022 contains the only response Corey and the other families have received from Boyle. Corey believes that Boyle's insistence that the ossuary be removed grows from Boyle's conservative views on cremation.

"I think Father Boyle has been promoting his view of what church means," Corey says. "Frankly, I think it's out of step with where the world is going." In 2016, the Vatican further clarified its views on cremation, stating that the Catholic Church, "insistently recommends that the bodies of the deceased be buried in cemeteries or other sacred places."

Thompson echoes Corey's sentiments on Boyle. "He is extremely traditional, and has, since he has been here, done his best to take the parish back to the days of Pope Benedict," she says, referring to the very conservative church leader who resigned as pope in 2013 and died in 2022. She adds that Boyle is going against the wishes of the current pope, Francis, who is considered to be more liberal. In addition, Thompson says that Boyle no longer allows women to be involved on the altar itself, such as distributing the Eucharist.

Thompson says that she heard the remains will be transferred to Mt. Calvary Catholic Cemetery in Eugene. *Eugene Weekly's* calls to Daniel Serres, the area leader of Archdiocese of Portland cemeteries, for confirmation have gone unreturned.

"I hope that Father Boyle and others would try to put themselves in our situation of what it feels like to have our loved ones' remains disturbed like this," Corey says. "Let them rest where they lie." ■

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