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San Francisco parish to build columbarium behind main altar

by NCR Staff

Responding to repeated requests for a parish columbarium, Dominican Fr. Xavier Lavagetto, pastor of St. Dominic Parish in San Francisco, has announced that 320 niches for cremated remains will be installed in the Friars Chapel behind the church's main altar.

It will be the only Catholic church in San Francisco to have a columbarium. In the 1930s, the city mandated the closure and removal of all cemeteries within its borders except for three historical sites. Four Episcopal churches and the Neptune Society now have columbaria, but Catholics must travel outside the city to bury their loved ones.

The niches at St. Dominic's will be reserved for registered parishioners and their families and will cost from \$4,200 to \$15,200, depending on their location. The parish also plans to include a low-cost community niche for those who cannot afford an individual niche. The columbarium will be financially self-sustaining and will not require any special fundraising among the parish's 3,200 registered parishioners.

According to a recent article in *Catholic San Francisco*, the archdiocesan weekly newspaper, the proposed columbarium has received the approval of San Francisco Archbishop George Niederauer, who said the Dominicans' ownership of the parish property and the parish's careful planning for the columbarium influenced his decision,

California has the highest number of cremations in the country. In 2009, 46 percent of Californians chose cremation, according to the Cremation Association of North America. Monica Williams, director of cemeteries for the archdiocese, told *Catholic San Francisco* that about 30 percent of those interred in recent years in the archdiocesan Holy Cross Cemetery were cremated.

But, she added, many more Catholics' cremated remains are kept on a shelf at home, divided between relatives or scattered, most likely because Catholics don't know that canon law requires that such remains be buried or entombed in a Catholic cemetery.

Many Catholics also remain confused about the church's longstanding ban on cremation because it was seen as defying the Christian belief in the resurrection of the body. The ban was lifted in 1963. Prior to that time, cremation of deceased Catholics was only allowed in extraordinary circumstances such as a plague.

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