

Cremations on the rise among U.S. Catholics

By Mike Latona
Staff writer

Although it still isn't a mainstream practice, cremation is an option being exercised more and more in the Catholic Church — including the Diocese of Rochester.

E. Robert Vogt, executive director of Holy Sepulchre Cemetery, 2461 Lake Ave., Rochester, noted that in 1981 his moratorium sold 257 casket spaces and 59 niches (small spaces in the wall for urns of ashes), and in 1991 the numbers were 320 and 117. That's an increase of 98 percent for niches, compared to only 24 percent for casket spaces.

"Trends in the United States always seem to start west and come east. In the west, 50 to 55 percent of the bodies are cremated," Vogt reported.

According to Father Thomas Mull, priest consultant to the diocesan Office of Liturgy, the choice of converting dead bodies into ashes was met with general approval by the Second Vatican Council in the 1960s. Prior to that time, cremations were only allowed in exceptional situations, such as when a body was infected and posed the threat of spreading disease.

The church's official stance on cremation is stated in the Code of Canon Law, written in 1983.

Canon 1176 states, in part: "The Church earnestly recommends that the pious custom of burying the bodies of the dead be observed; it does not, however, forbid cremation unless it has been chosen for reasons which are contrary to Christian teaching."

"(The church) still favors the custom of burying bodies, but doesn't forbid (cremation)," Father Mull said. "This is definitely not the custom of choice, but it's also one that's increasing."

Practical reasons exist as to why a person or his/her family might opt for

cremation. For example, if somebody dies in Florida but the funeral services are to be conducted in Rochester, it is much easier to transfer an urn of ashes several hundred miles than it would be a casket.

Also, for residents of large cities, it is becoming increasingly difficult to obtain cemetery plots simply because those cities are running out of room.

Cremation is widely practiced in other parts of the world. More than 80 percent of all bodies in Japan are cremated and more than 70 percent in England.

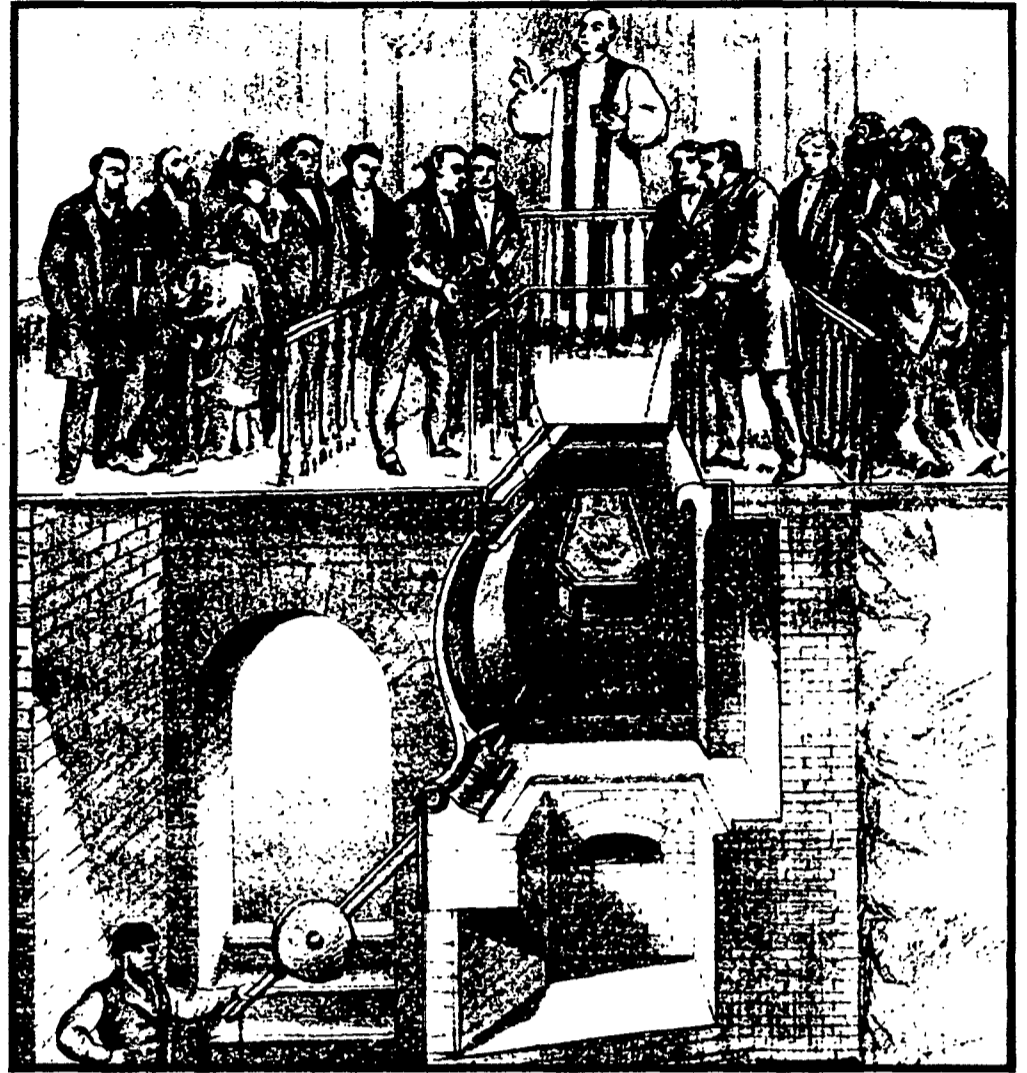
Unlike many countries and religions, the Catholic Church does not follow the custom of scattering ashes. Instead, the ashes are either placed in an urn and stored in a mausoleum, or buried.

Vogt said that of the cremated bodies that Holy Sepulchre Cemetery provides space for, "About 60 percent of the ashes go into the mausoleum and 30 percent into the ground." The other 10 percent fall into the "We don't know where" category, meaning that a family may have kept the ashes or scattered them somewhere.

Upon a person's death, the point at which cremation takes place can vary. A body may be viewed at a funeral home prior to cremation, or it may go directly to a crematorium — a building where bodies are cremated in furnaces — and a memorial Mass would follow.

Objection to Catholic cremations, said Father Mull, stem widely from custom. "It's not part of our experience or family tradition," he said. "You have people who say, 'This is our family funeral plot, and we're all going to be buried here.' There could also be a fear of fire; people don't want to imagine their loved ones consumed in flames."

"It's a misplaced fear," added Dr. Marvin L. Mich, dean of St. Bernard's Institute, 1100 S. Goodman St., Roches-



This illustration from the 1876 book *The Last Act* shows the design of one apparatus that incorporated aspects of a graveside service into the cremation process by allowing mourners to gather around the committal area.

ter. "Cremation raises question marks about notions of the resurrection of the body, but a body that's been in the ground for 1,000 years is really no different than cremated ashes."

Vogt noted that it's important for cremations to be regarded the same as any other type of burial.

"The church wants the same dignity applied to cremains (ashes remaining after a cremation has been performed) as bodies which have not been cremated," said Vogt. "Over the years people have scattered ashes and now realize they have nowhere to come and pay their respects."

In an article entitled, "Remains or

Cremains?" that appeared in the March 1986 issue of *The Catholic Cemetery*, Monsignor Albert W. Clody, director of cemeteries for the Buffalo diocese, writes:

"If cremation is a forgone conclusion — and it is for many of our people — we cannot afford the luxury of speculating about the church's preference for burial in the earth or in a crypt. In order to forestall, or offset, the less noble aspects of the cremation movement, we not only have to proclaim that it can be accomplished with dignity and respect; we may even have to consider the possibility of actually providing the service."

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