

HOLY SOUL'S CHAPEL, OUR PARISH COLUMBARIUM: A Place for the Living **By Father Valentine Erhahon**

2nd February 2025, Feast of the Presentation of the Lord will go down in our parish history of 119 years as a day when our parish came together to give thanks to God for a remarkable act of collective kindness we have done, not for the living, but for the dead.

All that the dead had, their houses, their properties, their teacups, their pens or winter jackets, their profession or degrees, their time with us, their kindness, and love have been taken away, given up in death. Lost. What is left is their remains: buried or cremated. And we as a parish have made a kind decision to preserve their remains in a beautiful space in our Church, a house of God that some of them have loved and, for some, worked to preserve for many years.

According to our records, the idea of creating an underground columbarium for the cremated remains of dead parishioners began just over 30 years ago. It was the initiative of Fr Michael Murphy, a parish priest in this Church, from 1985 to 2008. Many of you knew him well. May his soul rest in peace, Amen. We thank him for this initiative. In those three decades, the conversation about this Columbarium continued to linger, and in 2024, we were required to renovate this space for a range of reasons, primarily due to health and safety concerns regarding the wiring and cables.

In our Parish Crypt, the space under the Church, we renovated the rooms that had been partly used as a storeroom, a working sacristy, and, most of all, a place where the cremated remains of parishioners and people in the community who have died in the past and recently are resting, in a place we call a columbarium. A Columbarium is a group of spaces allocated typically within or at a wall of brick, stone, granite, marble, or other materials that contain or hold the cremated remains of the departed in a “worthy vessel.” The underground has a long basement. In it, there are many electric wires, old documents, junk, and various items. It also had a store room for the flower arrangers' items, candles, books, documents, etc. Next to it is a small room that holds the cremated remains of over 50 dead people. Some were in small coffins, some in tubes, some in urns, and some buried in the ground with a headstone.

Let's go back in time. The month is January 2023, when I drew the designs for the renovation of the Grotto in the Garden. You remember then that I mentioned it would be open so the sunlight would pass through our Lady's sides. I thought then, if someday we create a door in the wall into the underground basement, the lights will pass through so that this sacred place will be a sign of the resurrection, of the living and not of the dead. My idea was not just to renovate this small room as a columbarium for the dead (as before) but to create a Holy Soul's Chapel—which will be a place for the living. Yes, they are dead, but we pray their souls continue to live with the Lord in heaven, And their final earthly home should be a place of hope, light, beauty, and peace.

In the gospels, Matthew Chapter 28, verse 6, tells us that when the women arrived at the tomb on Easter morning, the Angel asked them: why are you looking for Jesus amongst the dead; he is living. When we visit the Columbarium, we are not just visiting the home of the dead; we are visiting the place that reminds us that those who have died are now living with God in heaven. We believe in the resurrection, God's mercy, and that in the end, our souls will be reunited with our bodies, wherever they are. For some, that place of reunification with the body will be our Parish Holy Soul's Chapel. On the Last Day, the Lord will raise the bodies of all who have died (John 5:28-29). Our Bodies and Souls will be reunited. The Catechism of the Catholic Church teaches that every spiritual soul "is immortal: It does not perish when it separates from the body at death, and it will be reunited with the body at the final Resurrection" (CCC 366). Every soul will unite with its resurrected body just before the Last Judgment ("Judgment Day") when Christ returns. The Last Judgment will come when Christ returns in glory. Only the Father knows the day and the hour; only He determines the moment of His coming.

My joy is that when families and loved ones visit the Holy Soul's Chapel, they will see a place where so much love and attention to detail have gone into it to ensure that the last and final place where their loved one is resting after all their toils in life, is a place of peace and one that reminds them of the resurrection, and not of death. As you come into the Holy Soul's Chapel, you will first see the Crucifix of our Lord Jesus Christ and the statues of Our Blessed Mother Mary and Saint John at the foot of the Cross. But these images are no ordinary images. They are the three images that once hung on the wall in our Church when it was opened in 1906 and stayed there until the post-war renovations. These images take us back over 100 years when so many people who are gone once saw them and prayed before them. They remind us to look forward to another century. They connect us to the past, present, and the future. They remind us of the ultimate act of love, our salvation when Jesus died for our sins so that we can return to heaven one day.

A lot of people have worked on this place, and I thank the contractors, the builders and electricians; those who decorated the place, and all the undertakers, especially those who moved the remains of the dead to their temporary chapel during the renovations and also brought the remains back to the new chapel. I thank all those who worked to compile the names of the dead and all those who have helped in many different ways to make this day possible. Most of all, I thank all those who have made significant donations, especially those who gave us £5000, £2000, and £1000 and all those who have donations in the hundreds of pounds. May the Lord God reward you for your kind generosity, not just for our Church, but in respect for your loved ones who have died. Of course, we still need more money, and I pray others will donate significantly. We need money to fully complete this project and make it even better than what we have now.

Most of all: I give thanks to God for the lives of those who will be resting in peace in a place of the living—in a place where generations yet unborn will be praying for them, in the house of God, until the Last Day. Amen.

WALL PLAQUE 1

**OF YOUR CHARITY, PRAY FOR THE BENEFACTORS WHOSE
GENEROUS DONATIONS MADE IT POSSIBLE FOR US TO CREATE
A HOLY SOUL'S CHAPEL FOR THE DEAD,
AND RENOVATE OUR PARISH COLUMBARIUM**

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