

Policy and Procedures on Columbaria in New Zealand Catholic Parishes

I. Introduction to the Policy

The Columbarium is a place designated for the inurnment and reverent disposal of the remains of the faithful departed. While in the past the Church has seen cremation as something to be avoided, the 2016 Instruction from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith *Ad resurgendum cum Christo; regarding the burial of the deceased and the conservation of ashes in the case of cremation* recognises that cremation is becoming a choice for many Catholics. The Columbarium provides a resting place that is recognisably Catholic for the ashes (cremains) of the faithful, consistent with Christian teaching on the dignity of the human body. It provides an opportunity for families to remember their loved ones and pray for them, and will in general inspire a sacred reverence for this life and hope for eternal life.

II Purpose

This Policy is established to assure that the procedures for inurnment and memorialisation are carried out in an orderly and respectful manner, and to describe and explain the services provided by the Parish in connection with these activities.

III Scope

This policy covers the inurnment of human remains following cremation (cremains) in New Zealand Catholic Parishes.

Eligibility for inurnment will normally be restricted to current or prior members of the Parish, their spouses/partners and children/step-children. Other persons may be considered by approval of the Operating Committee. (see below).

IV General Considerations

- 1. Columbaria constructed on Parish or Diocesan Land** must be permanent structures. Under New Zealand Law, Parish and Diocesan Land is vested in the Bishop as “Corporation Sole.” Any columbaria built on such land are to be canonically owned by the Parish or the Diocese. The Parish, and ultimately the Bishop, hold these cremains and related monies “in trust” so that the columbaria and contents are cared for with the same deliberation as the Parish Church. Deposited cremains are to be cared for in perpetuity.

2. Operating Committee

A committee of concerned parishioners should be established to oversee the construction, maintenance, collection and dispersal of targeted funds, deposition and (if necessary) removal of cremains as well as the good order of the site on which the Columbaria is sited. The Committee should seek to include membership of Māori Catholics from within the Parish/ Diocese to bring a Māori perspective / te ao Māori expertise to the conversation. The Committee will operate within the ultimate authority of the Parish Priest, in a similar manner to other permanent committees of the Parish.

A formal and separate trust, constructed under NZ Law is not necessary, as the checks and balances provided by the Charities Act and Canon Law itself provide sufficient protection. A separate operating account and CDF investment Account in the Name of the Parish may be appropriate, if the Bishop so approves. If a formal Trust is established, it may not own the columbaria, but is only to be concerned with what the operating committee might be tasked to do.

The Parish or Community is to create its own Agreement Document which forms the basis of the contract between the purchaser of the Columbarium niche and the Parish.

3. Extraordinary Expenditure

Due to the sacred and permanent nature of a columbarium, permission to establish a columbarium is to be regarded as an act of extraordinary administration as described in Canon law (1277 et al) and as put forth in the Diocesan Norms. This means that the Pastor, demonstrating proper parish consultation, with the consent of the Parish Finance Committee must obtain the consent of the Diocesan Bishop in order to construct a Columbarium. The Bishop also must obtain the consent of the Diocesan Finance Council and the College of Consultors.

4. Permission to Build

On receiving permission from the bishop, the Parish Finance Committee must consult the diocesan Property Manager to ensure high quality design and construction, and to determine how continuing care of the site will be achieved. Where formal guidelines for building or renovating have been published by a Diocese, such as *To the Glory of God, Auckland Diocese, 2015*, they should be used by the Parish as the primary reference document.

Security of funding, separate from the normal maintenance and operational funds of the parish, will need to be assured, and evidence provided to the Bishop.

Columbaria must adhere to Council by-laws, Resource Management Act, District Plans, Building Act and Regulations the local council by-laws, where applicable.

The Parish is to create its own Agreement Document as the basis of the contract between the purchaser of the niche and the parish. This document must reflect the “Corporation Sole” ownership by the Bishop. The Agreement Document must also be clear as to the term of inurnment and what will happen to cremains once the term is expired.

5. Tangata Whenua

In keeping with Te Tiriti o Waitangi, the local iwi/mana whenua must be identified and engaged with. This must happen early in the process of exploring the possibility of a columbarium, prior to any commitments being made. “Mana whenua” recognizes the iwi group who holds kaitiakitanga and responsibilities for specific sub-tribal boundaries.

Similarly, Tangata Whenua must be asked to participate with regard to the design and placement of the columbarium to ensure that the proposed structure suitably respects tikanga Māori in regards to care of the dead. The same consultation needs to occur if relocation of the columbarium is being considered. A guiding principle for our care for our dead in Aotearoa New Zealand should mirror tikanga Māori care for the dead.

6. Guiding Principle

The decision to construct a columbarium will be guided solely by a desire for the parish to provide a burial place for the cremains of parishioners, recognising the deceased’s faith commitment to the Catholic Church. The decision to construct a Columbarium is not to be made merely as a means of raising funds for the parish.

V Placement and Process

If a Parish/Community wishes to establish a Columbarium, the following high-level steps are required:

1. Identify a suitable location within the overall site context: considerations include
 - a. Tikanga Māori
 - b. Respect for the faithful departed, accessibility for all mourners, provision of a quiet and restful area for meditation;
 - b. Empathic architectural and landscape design that acknowledges the history of the buildings and landscapes around the proposed Columbarium. e.g. discreet scale and proportions, materials, colours
 - c. Buildability, suitable geology, durability and maintenance over time.
 - d. An understanding of the long-term plans for the current Church site.
 - e. The broader needs of the parish community.
2. Consult with Tangata Whenua. (It would be prudent to include Māori Catholics in the parish as part of the planning. The Vicar for Māori or

equivalent within the Diocese may guide and help navigate consultation with iwi and/or mana whenua.)

3. Provide an initial concept proposal to the Bishop or his appointees, seeking consent in principle before any significant planning is commenced.
4. Consult the parish community and achieve consensus for support before commencing any significant planning.
5. Once the Bishop's consent in principle has been received, follow the process for development of property projects detailed in the Diocesan Handbook – consent development, detailed planning, preconstruction, construction delivery. Bishop's approval is required at the detailed design stage for the employment of contractors.
6. Ensure the development of the Columbarium and related processes/documentation align with the terms of this policy.

VI Introduction to Procedures

As stated above in IV (3), each Parish/Community will create its own Agreement Document which forms the basis of the contract between the purchaser of the Columbarium niche and the Parish. The following are Guidelines for the practical management of the Columbarium. They may be amended in the light of each Parish's circumstances, by the Operating Committee, and approved by the Parish Council/designated parish leadership group and Parish Priest.

VI Niche Agreement Documentation

1. Niche Licences and Certificates: The Columbarium shall consist of niches, uniform in size and style, of sufficient dimensions to house the complete cremains securely. The committee will determine the maximum size of urn or provide a standard cylinder for the urn to be inserted into. The design may include double niches but subject to design and at discretion of the committee.
2. Each niche shall be covered by a plaque engraved with the name of the deceased, their date of birth and death, or other details approved by the Parish. The Parish shall create Niche Licences, which are made available for purchase. The purchaser's rights shall only be that of a licensee, and will not include any other interests, rights or benefits in respect of the Columbarium. The purchaser may apply for one or more licences, and may designate a licence for someone other than him/herself - the Designee. Purchasers and Designees agree that the Parish will not be held legally responsible for any damage to the Columbarium or its contents by vandalism, weather, or acts of God.

3. Register of Niche Licences: Upon the purchase of a licence, the Parish Priest/ Administrator or other authorised employee shall issue a Certificate of Niche Licence, and enter into an official Register the niche number, price paid, name and address of Purchaser and Designee. The Purchaser or Designee shall be expected to retain the original Certificate.

The Parish Council/designated parish leadership group, through the Columbarium Operating Committee, shall be the custodian of all books and records of the Columbarium. Such records shall include, but shall not be limited to, the name(s) of the deceased in each inurnment, the deceased's dates of birth and death, and the deceased's next of kin or legal representative shall be included. The Parish shall also maintain a list of all Purchasers and Designees, together with the names of the next of kin or legal representatives of such persons as a chart or diagram designating by number each niche. The Parish Council/designated parish leadership group shall keep a record of all income and expenses associated with the construction and maintenance of the Columbarium, which books and records shall be open and available for inspection by parishioners and eligible persons upon reasonable notice.

4. Niche Price: the price of a Niche Licence, determined by the Parish, includes the right to the inurnment of the Designee, and upkeep of the Columbarium. The Parish may decide to include the cost of the nameplate, or to leave that to the family of the Designee. The price paid to the Parish, and published by the Parish through the Parish Administrator, does not include the cost of cremation, urns or any other costs that may be incurred. On an annual basis, the Parish Administrator shall make any recommendations to the Operating Committee on any necessary changes to the price list. GST shall apply to the price of Niche Licences; koha or other donations in return for a licence are not permitted. While the Parish may allow payment by instalments, the Niche Licence must be paid in full prior to inurnment. The Parish shall decide its refund policy if a Niche Licence is cancelled prior to inurnment, allowing for any expenses incurred e.g. a Licence may be surrendered by the Purchaser upon written notification to the Parish Priest prior to inurnment for a refund of the purchase price less an administrative fee of 10%.

A proportion of the Niche price may be reserved for adequate future long-term maintenance requirements of the columbarium (and identified in church Parish accounts) at the discretion of the columbarium committee. Niche price is otherwise returned to Parish account to recover construction costs and support of the Parish.

5. Removals : The Roman Catholic Bishop of the relevant Diocese retains the absolute right, in his discretion, to remove containers of cremains, niches and niche covers and to relocate all or any part of the Columbarium (including niches) as he may deem necessary or advisable. In the event that the Parish Church should cease to serve as a Church, and that the removal of the Columbarium is appropriate, the

Columbarium and any inured cremains will be relocated to a suitable location, in accordance with Diocesan standards. The necessary records in this case will be maintained, and, where possible, the relevant family members will be notified. If it is necessary to relocate an existing niche for any reason, the Parish will provide another niche for the cremains and will endeavour to advise the next of kin of the new location and the reason for the transfer. However, the Parish will allow movement of the cremated remains to another location upon receiving legal authority from a designated heir of the deceased. In the event of such a request the Niche price is forfeited.

VI Term of Inurnment and Potential Relocation

Deposited cremains are to be cared for in perpetuity. If the known long-term plans for the current Church site indicate a possible need for relocation of the cremains, this is to be considered prior to the development and made known to families when purchasing a niche. Costs of relocation in this event will be met by the parish.

VII Inurnment

All arrangements for the inurnment shall be made through the Parish Priest, with sufficient time to permit verification of records. A Certificate of Cremation shall accompany the cremains when they are presented for inurnment, to confirm that they are the cremains of a Designee of a Niche Licence.

Inurnment shall take place in the course of a religious service approved by The Parish Priest at which the Parish Priest or a designated lay minister presides.

*Policy approved by New Zealand Catholic Bishops Conference on 6 November 2023.
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