

Question Corner: Burial of unbaptized/ Role of deacon

Q. My son passed away recently at the age of 35. We held a memorial service for him since we could not have a funeral Mass. (He was not baptized as an infant — which was my decision, of course, not his.)

I have been a Catholic all my life, have followed Christian principles and have raised my children with those same values. My parish priest is saying that since my son was never baptized, he cannot be buried in our church's Catholic cemetery (where our family has already purchased plots for cremains.)

I was very saddened to be told this — because now, until my husband or I die, we will hold onto our son's ashes; and we ourselves will now choose to be buried in a non-Catholic cemetery so that our son is not laid to rest alone. We want him to be next to us. I would appreciate whatever information or guidance you might offer. (northeast Texas)

A. First, my condolences and the assurance of my prayers. Losing a child is, I think, the hardest loss of all — one for which no one is ever really prepared.

You live with the understanding that your parents are likely to predecease you and that your spouse might as well, but you never expect to outlive your own children. So I will pray for you, that God will ease your sorrow — and for your son, that he may enjoy the peace of God's presence and one day welcome you there.

Meanwhile, please take comfort in the fact that your son's remains can in fact be buried with you in the family plot you have purchased. Family ties are sacred, and the church has no interest in separating loved ones — either in life or in death.

Nothing in canon law prohibits a non-Catholic from being buried in a Catholic cemetery.

The website of the Archdiocese of Philadelphia, for example, says clearly: “Non-Catholics may be buried with their Catholic spouses or other family members ... in a Catholic cemetery.” It is true that, in most circumstances, a Catholic funeral Mass may be offered only for those already baptized in a Christian denomination (several of the ritual’s prescribed prayers refer directly to the baptism of the deceased), but there is no such limitation regarding the place of burial.

Q. Recently I read an article in our Catholic newspaper about the work of a deacon in a parish not far from my own. That deacon regularly baptizes people and distributes Communion at Mass. What I don’t understand is where he gets the authority to do those things.

The deacon in our own parish is not allowed to do any of that. With most parishes now having only one priest, wouldn’t it be helpful if deacons could do more? (Indianapolis metropolitan area)

A. Deacons are authorized by the laws of the Catholic Church to baptize, witness marriages, perform wake and funeral services outside of Mass, distribute holy Communion, proclaim the Gospel, preach homilies and expose the Blessed Sacrament for eucharistic adoration. (A deacon is not empowered — as a priest is — to consecrate the bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ, to hear confessions or to anoint the sick.)

The work of a deacon, however, is done at the discretion and under the immediate supervision of the pastor of the parish to which that deacon is assigned. So there is some variation from parish to parish as regards the particular ministries of the deacon assigned there and the frequency with which those ministries are exercised.

As you have pointed out, the current shortage of priests has made the work of deacons in the church today all the more valuable.

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