

An Anatomical Offering: The Gift That Keeps on Giving

by Steve Walker

FOR CATHOLICS IN UPSTATE NEW YORK, the Albany Diocesan Cemeteries Anatomical Gift Memorial Service program provides an opportunity to formally recognize, thank, and offer prayers for program participants and their families. The memorial service is annual but was not held in 2020 due to COVID-19 restrictions.

“Last year was the first year since the program’s inception in 1983 that Albany Diocesan Cemeteries did not offer a memorial service for the anatomical gift program,” says Jennifer Mele, communications director for Albany Diocesan Cemeteries in Menands, NY.

In order to give some level of closure to families, the Albany Medical College in New York, which has partnered with the Albany Diocesan Cemeteries for Catholics who have donated their bodies, created its own private memorial service in 2020. It was not made public due to the pandemic, but was recorded and copies were given to the next of kin. The video was also posted on YouTube.

Local Institutions in Need

Most states have at least one medical school with an organ or whole-body donor program that allows the institution to have

subjects for use in educating future doctors, nurses, and other medical personnel. For those who choose to donate their bodies to science after death, it is often an alternative to the traditional funeral and burial.

One such school is Albany Medical College in New York. By partnering with the Albany Diocesan Cemeteries for Catholics, the cemetery provides no-cost services and grave space for program participants after all studies are completed.

Colleges and universities do not pay for bodies, but many will take care of the administrative fees involved, as well as transportation (within reason) from the place of death to the school. Most will cremate the final remains at their expense.

No federal agency tracks whole-body donations, but researchers estimate about 18,000 cadavers are donated annually in the United States. Educators and researchers tell us that this is not nearly enough for the

research and educational programs they need to conduct.

Ninety percent of U.S. adults say they support organ donation while only 60 percent are signed up as donors according to www.organdonor.gov. While many people know about organ donation, few Americans have given thought to whole-body donation after death.

Religious and Ethical Considerations

Families can learn about the anatomical gift program through relatives who were donors, or through the hospital when they inquire about donating their body to medical science, according to Mele. “We’ve noticed over the years that there are usually at least one or two medical professionals who have chosen anatomical gift and are being interred in the yearly ceremony.”

When considering organ or whole-body donation, families often wonder about their religion’s stance on donation. Families should reach out to their faith leaders for answers, and faith leaders should be encouraged to stay up to date on their denomination’s positions on this issue. Most religions have no prohibition against donation, but positions can and do change, and a family will appreciate a ready and clear answer in their time of need.

There are a great many organizations that will accept whole-body donations. But some of these are in the “body broker” business and donors may have no idea that their bodies could be parted out and sold for research to as many as six different educational or research facilities.

Sara Marsden-Ille of U.S. Funerals Online says, “This shouldn’t be a problem with colleges and universities that operate a body bequeathal program to support their own medical schools.” According to Marsden-Ille, these institutions, like Albany



Michael P. Smith, Director of Anatomical Gift Program for Albany Medical College.



Medical College, will always ensure that the gift is used in a way that will satisfy the donor's and family's desires to contribute to medical science in a positive and dignified manner.

Moving Forward

"We're hoping to conduct a combined 2020–2021 in-person anatomical gift memorial service later this year," says Mele.

"We look forward to when we can gather in prayer with families and our Albany Medical College friends to pay our respects and honor program participants."

Lori Biskup, the family service representative for Albany Diocesan Cemeteries, summed it up in the 2019 Anatomical Gift Memorial Service's opening remarks: "Your loved one is extraordinary for their selflessness of committing their bodies to benefit

society, but that is not the sum total of what they will be remembered for, in your eyes or God's eyes. Anatomical gift is just a reflection of their lifelong sacrifice, their faith, and their love of family and friends." ❏

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