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## A brotherhood made whole: Deceased monks return to abbey after decades in cemetery | Faith

*By Methodist Health System*

13-16 minutes

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The Rev. Damian Szodenyi rose slowly from the grave, his earthly remains hoisted by the bucket of a backhoe, the chug and thunk of the big machine interrupting his long rest.

Buried since 1998, his remains were soon carried to a maintenance area, away from public view. There, his concrete funeral container would be opened, the simple wooden box inside it removed and Szodenyi's bones transferred to a new casket in preparation for one last journey.

In life, he had been a Hungarian immigrant, a teacher, a headmaster, a University of Dallas dean and an artist. But above all, he had been a Cistercian monk.



*The Rev. Paul McCormick (left) and the Rev. Joseph Van House watch as workers prepare to remove the remains of two fellow Cistercian*

*monks from their graves at Calvary Hill Cemetery in Dallas.*

*(Smiley N. Pool/Staff Photographer)*

Unlike some other Catholic monks, such as Jesuits and Dominicans, Cistercians take a vow of stability that commits them to their brothers, and to one place, for life — and beyond. This unusual promise binds the men together as they seek God in their lives.

But for years, Cistercian Abbey Our Lady of Dallas had no cemetery or mausoleum on its Irving campus, so the monks who lived and died there were buried several miles away at Calvary Hill Cemetery.

That was unsettling to the survivors, who wanted their brothers with them.

Now they will be. In June, after years of praying and planning, the abbey dedicated a new, \$1.5 million crypt, built largely with donations from alumni of the all-male Cistercian Preparatory School. The monks are bringing their brothers back to the abbey, all 20 of them, in reverse order of death. Eleven have already been moved and entombed in the crypt.



“Not even death separates us from the community to which we took vows as young men,” said the Rev. Peter Verhalen, the Cistercian abbot.

On this hot day in late June, two more monks would begin their two-day pilgrimage — Szodenyi and the Rev. Rudolph Zimanyi, who died in 1994. It would fall to funeral director Chris Taylor to gently and respectfully transfer their remains — and whatever they might have taken with them to the grave.



*Calvary Hill Cemetery worker Andres Buenrostro removes the headstone of the Rev. Rudolph Zimanyi before the monk's remains were lifted from the grave he had occupied for nearly 23 years.*

*(Smiley N. Pool/Staff Photographer)*

## **A gentle undertaking**

Taylor, of Dignity Memorial, got interested in undertaking when

the nuns at his Catholic school sent him to serve funerals as an altar boy. In the business 40 years, he buried many of the monks he's now disinterring.

"I dearly love their community," he said.

To prepare for his work, he pulled on a blue protective suit, blue rubber gloves and a straw hat. After breaking down the concrete container, he assessed Szodenyi's wooden casket, which had darkened and deteriorated over the years. Reaching in, he came upon the crucifix that had been buried with the priest. It was worn and caked in mud, but salvageable.

Three monks dressed in black and white habits watched over the funeral director as he worked. Verhalen, the abbot, was a boy when he first met Szodenyi. He remembered the old monk as "a Renaissance guy" who would ask boys applying to Cistercian Prep if they knew who Homer was.

Verhalen's answer at age 9: "I have no idea!"

The Rev. Paul McCormick was a novice — an apprentice monk — during Szodenyi's retirement years. McCormick, who boasts no artistic ability, did what he could to help the older monk with his creative projects.

"We had the agreement that if he'd make it, I'd hang it," he said. His mentor's work, mostly paintings and sculptures on religious themes, graces every corner of the abbey.

Szodenyi knew when to give a younger monk a little slack. Sometimes when they visited the elderly, he would let McCormick slip away to watch TV even though he wasn't

supposed to.

Monk mischief!



*The concrete container bearing the remains of the Rev. Damian Szodenyi emerges from his grave. The container was carried to a maintenance area outside public view, where the monk's remains were transferred to a new casket.*

*(Smiley N. Pool/Staff Photographer)*

## **Beatific smiles**

Taylor reached into Szodenyi's casket and withdrew an object.

A pink, plastic box, about the size of a fist.

"His teeth," Taylor said. "We would have put them in there with him. Because you don't want to get to heaven and not have your teeth."

The monks smiled their beatific smiles.

"It's funny," McCormick said. "He used to always lose his teeth."



*Funeral director Chris Taylor found this crucifix still intact inside the casket of the Rev. Damian Szodenyi, who was buried with it in 1998.*

*(Smiley N. Pool/Staff Photographer)*

Slowly and carefully, to avoid disturbing the remains, Taylor and his assistant, Alan Stewart, exposed the thin white mattress on which Szodenyi's body had been laid out. The operation had a distinct military feel because Stewart, who is former Air Force, kept calling Taylor "sir."

On the mattress, one could see a few bones, Szodenyi's shoes and socks, and the stained but unmistakable black and white habit in which he was buried.

His brother monks, dressed identically, gazed upon him in silence.

"Quite honestly, this has been as smooth as it could possibly be," Taylor said, wiping sweat from his forehead.

Removing the second monk, Zimanyi, was harder. His concrete container crumbled when the backhoe touched it, so the cemetery workers had to attach the cables to the casket itself. Fortunately, Zimanyi had been buried in a metal box, so though it was rusted, it held together when the backhoe hoisted it out.

Back behind the maintenance shed, Taylor and Stewart cleared the mud away from the casket. After 30 minutes of hot, hard work, they lowered Zimanyi into a new, 20-gauge steel casket — the Revere Silver by Batesville, if you're interested.



*A hearse carrying the remains of the Rev. Damian Szodenyi drives on its way to Szodenyi's entombment rite at Cistercian Abbey in Irving. The Rev. Peter Verhalen, abbot, presided over the service in the monastery's newly dedicated crypt.*

*(Smiley N. Pool/Staff Photographer)*

## 'We're here to stay'

The trip from Calvary Hill to Cistercian is three miles as the soul flies, 4.8 miles by city streets. The monks made the journey the next day in separate black Cadillac Echelon hearses, or “coaches,” as the funeral industry euphemistically calls them.

A dozen of their brothers awaited them at the abbey. Cistercian has 26 monks, but a few were traveling and several are too old to be pallbearers. When the hearses arrived, young monks loaded the caskets onto wheeled carts and steered them down a ramp into the crypt.



*Monks assist funeral director Chris Taylor (facing, center) with the casket containing the remains of the Rev. Damian Szodenyi at Cistercian Abbey in Irving.*

*(Smiley N. Pool/Staff Photographer)*

The space is unadorned, befitting the simplicity of the monks' lives. The walls and floor are concrete, with six concrete pillars supporting the roof. On the far wall hangs a crucifix illuminated by a narrow skylight.

The crypt is God's filing cabinet, and each monk who has died has a reserved space with his name on it:

Fr. Christopher Rabay, 1919-1999. Fr. Placid Csizmazia,

1915-1999. Fr. Balthasar Szarka, 1925-2000 ...

The young monks milled around in their black and white habits, waiting for the service to start. Some of them never met the older guys, but they know how the communists drove their brother monks out of Hungary, and how the displaced monks landed in Texas in the mid-'50s.

"For us, this service represents the continuity of generations," the Rev. Thomas Esposito said. "It's the ultimate sign that their enterprise succeeded. A definitive statement that we're here to stay."



*The Rev. Thomas Esposito, top, posted photos on Facebook of himself and other monks trying out the spaces they will someday occupy.*

*(Thomas Esposito)*

These are holy men, but they're also guys, and many are young, and they mess around the way young brothers do. They call themselves penguins, or sometimes Oreo monks. But their favorite nickname is "skunk monks."

When the crypt was under construction in January, before the granite covers were fixed into place, some of the young monks

climbed inside and posed for pictures. Esposito posted them on Facebook with this disclaimer: “Please don’t be scandalized — this was the Abbot’s idea, so we were under obedience!”

Verhalen called the service to order. Priests don’t often have occasion to preside over someone’s second burial, and the liturgy offered no hints on how to do it. Verhalen consulted with Austrian monks esteemed for their knowledge of such things.

Their advice: Go with the standard graveside service.



*The Rev. Peter Verhalen, abbot of Cistercian Abbey Our Lady of Dallas, sprinkles holy water on the caskets of the Revs. Damian Szodenyi and Rudolph Zimanyi during their entombment service.*

*(Smiley N. Pool/Staff Photographer)*

“Our brothers Damian and Rudolph have gone to their rest in the peace of Christ,” Verhalen began, as 14 monks and three funeral home employees listened with their hands folded in front of them.

“May we who mourn be reunited one day with our brothers.”

But nobody mourned that day, not really. This was a rare funeral without tears. For the monks, the 10-minute service ended with the Lord’s Prayer and the satisfaction that they’d set something right.

Verhalen talked about Zimanyi as the funeral home workers closed his crypt.

He taught French at the University of Dallas, the abbot said. His desk was always covered in books. He read everything and remembered it. He wrote poetry and translated T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* into Hungarian.

He smoked heavily, died of cancer, spent almost 23 years away from his brothers, and now was home.



*Monks shoulder the casket of the Rev. Rudolph Zimanyi into the crypt at Cistercian Abbey in Irving. The monks take a vow of stability committing them to the abbey for life and beyond, so one day they will all be entombed here, as well.*

*(Smiley N. Pool/Staff Photographer)*