



CATHOLIC CEMETERIES & MORTUARIES

LOS ANGELES | SANTA BARBARA | VENTURA

December 21, 2023

Dear Saint Thomas Aquinas Cemetery Community,

The Catholic Cemeteries Department of the Archdiocese of Los Angeles has recently undertaken a significant effort to restore Saint Thomas Aquinas Cemetery. The objective of this project is to include a columbarium niche feature to accommodate the inurnment of cremated remains. The initiative was brought forth due to requests from the local Catholic community at Saint Thomas Aquinas Parish, who expressed the need for a sacred space for Catholics and their families in the Ojai Valley. After careful consideration, it was proposed that the existing Saint Thomas Aquinas Catholic Cemetery be utilized for this purpose. The cemetery had been inactive for decades and had limited or no access to visitation.

Plans were created to install a single columbarium unit with 48 double niches. Accommodating up to 96 inurnments. The columbarium unit will be topped with the statue of Saint Thomas Aquinas, to whom the cemetery is dedicated. Working with the county of Ventura to meet state and local requirements, adjustments to the plan were made to add off-street parking and handicap access. This planned development area will include a gravel parking lot with 21 spaces, two of which are paved and designated for handicapped accessibility. The area will also feature a concrete walkway that is handicapped accessible and leads to the planned columbarium unit. After obtaining planning permission, which involved conducting a Cultural Resources Study, including a field survey, archival records research, and outreach to Native American communities, work was scheduled to commence on the project site.

In early September, when we began the initial grading work, several community members expressed concerns about the possible disturbance of existing burials and the possible presence of native artifacts on the development site. As part of our commitment to preserving the site's heritage and in response to the community's concerns, we requested a study to be conducted. The purpose of the study has been to ensure that we avoid any disturbance or interference with any existing burials and uphold our respect for the site's cultural significance.

As part of this initiative, Rincon Consultants, Inc. was engaged to conduct the study focused on two key objectives: first, to ensure that any soil that was moved during the initial grading of the site did not disrupt any existing burials, and second, to use Ground Penetrating Radar (GPR) to determine the possible location of any burials within the development area.

Regarding the first item, for two-and-a-half weeks, crews sifted all displaced soil under the observation of a certified Osteologist. No human remains or artifacts were found. We have also recently received the GPR results and are in the process of reviewing the results against the proposed development plan. Based on that evaluation, we will work with the county to make modifications to respect and honor the 2-3 possible grave locations identified within the planned development area that were not previously identified. We will continue to work with the county to modify and adjust the final plans as appropriate.

Currently, we are in discussions with Rincon Consultants to provide a further historical study on the entire cemetery to identify any further existing grave sites using GPR that may be in other areas of the cemetery aside from the area currently being developed. All sites identified will be appropriately marked and memorialized. Our goal is to develop a comprehensive overview of the cemetery that can be shared with the community since we have been unable to ascertain the existence of any records since the cemetery has been inactive. We are committed to demonstrating our utmost dedication to preserving the site's integrity and maintaining its historical importance for future generations.

Please find the Ground Penetrating Radar (GPR) report attached.

Sincerely,
Catholic Cemeteries & Mortuaries Management