

Johnson: Removal of memorials stuns, angers donors
Crystal Cathedral charged up to \$3,000 for the granite memorials.

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The faithful, to say the least, are not pleased.

The Roman Catholic Diocese of Orange last weekend revealed plans to remove the nearly 1,800 "Walk of Faith" stones that surround its recently acquired Crystal Cathedral in Garden Grove.

Judy De Clercq, an 88-year-old Anaheim widow, is heartbroken at the planned removal of the memorial stones on the Walk of Faith at the Crystal Cathedral that she bought to honor her late son, Arthur Lee De Clercq III, in the framed photo at left, and husband, Arthur Lee De Clercq Jr., at right. Although the Crystal Cathedral promised the walk "silently speaks through the centuries," a letter from the Christ Catholic Cathedral Corp. says they will be removed and digital copies retained. "They were my whole world," she said. "He was the love of my life, and he was my baby."

The engraved, diamond-shaped granite memorials were sold over the last three decades by Robert Schuller to people in Orange County, across the country and the world, and he embedded them in the walkways and paths that surround the massive glass and steel structure that is now called Christ Cathedral.

Each one bears a Bible quotation and the name of the donor who paid \$2,500 to \$3,000, and received a promise that the memorials would remain at the cathedral "for centuries to come."

Schuller should have promised only decades to come.

In an Aug. 16 letter to purchasers of the stones, Christ Catholic Cathedral Corp., which bought the cathedral out of Schuller's bankruptcy proceedings in February 2012, informed them that "while we have made every effort to preserve the Walk of Faith Stones, in the process of preserving and restoring the campus, it has become necessary to remove them."

Fred C. Helms, chief operating officer of the corporation, in an interview on Wednesday put it bluntly:

"The name of the person they donated to, and the obligation they received was from who?" he asked. "Yes, Robert Schuller. So we are, in essence, like a new homeowner. Do we even have a legal responsibility to tell (purchasers) what we are doing? No, we don't."

Instead, he said the corporation's plan is to provide purchasers a digital image of their stone on a website the corporation is creating at a cost of \$40,000 so that they can view their stones "forever, and at no cost or expense to them."

"I don't want their friggin' digital picture!" screamed Donna Atkins, 63, of Apple Valley, who purchased a stone in 2006 as a memorial to Tom and Inez Atkins, her husband's late parents. "What good is that? What good would that do?"

Atkins, who for years ran a Fullerton real estate business, alternated between full-blown anger and

outright weeping.

“I am so mad,” she said. “This is so underhanded, despicable, a disgrace. It's unthinkable!”

Helms, in the interview, said he knew the decision would not be a popular one.

“But we are all good Christians. Yet of our own volition, we are paying respect to that they gave to a totally different organization. We respect what they did.”

Hence, he said, the website was being created. And if a purchaser wants their stone back, Helms said, they would be welcome to retrieve it.

In the days since his letter was put out, Helms said, he has received “100 or so” responses. Only three of those, he added, have responded negatively.

“I understand why some would be upset,” he said, “but that anger is misplaced. We are doing everything we can.”

Maybe what Fred Helms does not understand is that the Faith Stones were not simply stones to those who purchased them.

Atkins and her family bought their stone for \$2,500, of which \$2,000 would be placed, Schuller had promised, into a “Perpetual Endowment Fund” that would keep the cathedral's gardens blooming, the glass sparkling and the fountain waters flowing. She figures the fund got mangled in Schuller's widely reported bankruptcy proceedings.

But still, she says.

“Having been taken away for a short time in presence, not in heart ... to see your face with great desire,” is how the Atkins family stone reads. She cries as she reads it.

She remembers sitting on the concrete, her family surrounding the stone, every Sunday after services. They simply paid respects. She would bring a rag and cleaner to make the stone shine.

“We spent months picking over the Bible to find just that right quotation,” Atkins said.

“I feel like I've been defiled.”

Standing outside the cathedral on a recent afternoon, I saw dozens of people slowly strolling the walkways reading the Bible quotations. Families, some lying or squatting on the concrete near the stones, often asked a stranger to take their picture.

Judy De Clercq received her letter last Saturday. She was sobbing when she opened the front door of her Anaheim home.

“I am just so heartbroken,” the 88-year-old woman told me.

She bought her stone for \$3,000 in 1996, not long after her husband, Lee, died. They had been members long before the cathedral was even built, volunteered every year for the “Glory of Easter”

and "Glory of Christmas" pageants, donated chairs and windows to the church. Lee helped circulate the collection plates every Sunday.

"Lee had always wanted (a stone)," she said, "but we couldn't afford it. After he died, instead of flowers, I asked for money for the stone. 'Let the peace of God rule in your hearts,' it says. Lee would have loved it. He would have been so proud."

Three years ago, her son, Arthur Lee De Clercq III, a lieutenant with the Huntington Park Police Department, died of cancer. To honor him, she purchased another stone, this time against the wishes of her entire family.

"She barely gets by on Social Security, and she spent money from the very little she had in savings," her daughter, Jayne Chapman, 65, of Charlotte, N.C., told me.

"I begged, borrowed and stole to get my son's stone," Judy De Clercq said. "I had to. He's my baby."

She understands none of it, she says. What could she do with a digital picture? She has no computer and wouldn't know how to work one, she says.

"I was so thankful when the Catholics got the rights to the church; happy because they would be sensitive to what went on before. But now," she said, tears in her eyes, "I just hate them."

Her son is buried in the graveyard at the cathedral just feet away from the crypt that holds his father's ashes and one day will hold his mother's.

"They told me it was going to be there forever," Judy De Clercq cried. "I'm going to call them when I can talk without crying."

"I am going to beg them not to do this. What else can I do?"

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