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Activists rally to bury the bodies from Gosnell abortion trial

by Sarah Pulliam Bailey by Religion News Service

Now that the trial for abortion provider Kermit Gosnell has ended with a conviction, many are asking what public officials in Philadelphia plan to do with the 47 bodies from the case.

After Gosnell's arrest in 2011, then-Archbishop Cardinal Justin Rigali asked the district attorney's office for the bodies of the aborted fetuses. The bodies were being retained for the trial, but after it ended and Gosnell was sentenced to life in prison, his successor, Archbishop Charles Chaput, has renewed the request to bury the bodies.

Francis Maier, special assistant to Chaput, said he doesn't know whether or not a service would include a Catholic Mass, but he said it would be quiet and dignified.

"We're not interested in turning it into a circus," Maier said. "Points were made in the trial; now we just want to pay proper respect to the remains. We assume this is going to happen; we just haven't been able to secure it yet."

Tasha Jamerson, spokeswoman for the Philadelphia district attorney, said several people have called and tweeted requests for the bodies, but the ultimate decision will come from the medical examiner's office, which was unavailable to comment Friday.

Gosnell was convicted in May of first-degree murder in the deaths of three babies; prosecutors charged that Gosnell would routinely perform late-term abortions and use scissors to puncture the spines of babies born alive.

Investigators found 47 bodies from abortions stuffed in cat litter, bags, boxes and juice containers in

Gosnell's squalid Philadelphia clinic. On Friday, many anti-abortion activists took to Twitter to demand a proper burial with the hashtag #gosnellbabies.

Fr. Frank Pavone, a Catholic priest who heads New York-based Priests for Life, was also among those requesting the bodies. In May, Pavone performed a service to give proper names to the dead babies.

He said he would like to perform a Catholic Mass for the babies then hold a separate interdenominational burial service.

"We can begin to reverse this dynamic of pain and bring about some healing," Pavone said. "It's a step of healing, of closure for those who have been following this."

Liam Goligher, pastor of the historic Tenth Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia, said he would be interested in an interdenominational service. Christians' views of whether those who are aborted go to heaven differ, he notes.

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"I think there's good hope to think that these children are with God using the general principle of God's mercy," Goligher said. "Either way, some respect has to be shown to the babies."

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