

Supreme Court affirms monks' right to sell caskets

by [Katherine Burgess](#)

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WASHINGTON (RNS) A group of Catholic monks can continue selling their handmade caskets after the U.S. Supreme Court declined to hear an appeal from Louisiana funeral directors.

“We really can now move forward without worrying about being shut down,” said Deacon Mark Coudrain, manager of St. Joseph Woodworks in Covington, La. “This is going to affect a lot of other people. A lot of people are going to have opportunities to do things that are their legal right to generate revenue.”

In a little-noticed ruling on Oct. 15, the Supreme Court declined to hear the case between the brothers of St. Joseph Abbey and the Louisiana State Board of Embalmers and Funeral Directors.

In 2007, the abbey began selling handmade coffins, prompting the board to file a lawsuit that argued Louisiana law required a funeral director's license for casket sales.

The monks later brought suit in federal court and were upheld by both the Eastern District of Louisiana in 2010 and the 5th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals in March 2013. The funeral directors appealed to the Supreme Court; by not agreeing to hear the case, the Supreme Court let stand the appeals court ruling.

The 5th Circuit said in its decision that Louisiana does not regulate the use or construction of caskets. People may purchase any casket from out of state and Louisiana law does not require the use of a casket at all.

“Whatever special expertise a funeral director may have in casket selection is irrelevant to it being the sole seller of caskets,” the decision said.

The monks had buried their own members as well as the occasional bishop or donor in handmade caskets for years. After Hurricane Katrina destroyed the abbey’s timberland, a source of revenue, the monks decided to sell caskets to fund the medical and educational needs of the abbey.

The monastery invested \$200,000 in St. Joseph Woodworks and sold “monastic” and “traditional” cypress caskets for \$1,500 and \$2,000, prices “significantly lower” than caskets at funeral homes, according to the 5th Circuit Court’s decision.

Coudrain said selling caskets also serves as a way of sharing Catholic teaching about the meaning of death.

“The theology of the church is that our bodies are a temple of the Holy Spirit, and the spirit has moved on, but we want to respect the body as well,” Coudrain said. “Part of the Catholic tradition is you have a viewing, a funeral and a burial.”