

A Unique, Creative Approach to Catholic Cremation Gardens

by Neal Bastable



As reported in *Catholic Cemetery* articles, cremation among Catholics is growing. The Cremation Association of North America (CANA) in their presentation at NCCC's 2001 annual conference confirmed that among Catholics, though less overall, the growth itself is somewhat parallel to the general population. Recognizing this reality, the National Conference of Catholic Bishops has published *Reflections on the Body, Cremation, and Catholic Funeral Rites* as reported in *Catholic Cemetery* articles. These articles point to the Order of Christian Funerals and the sacredness of the body as integral parts of our Catholic understanding and practice of the burial of the dead.

Though the Church's preference of cremation interment is in a Catholic cemetery when possible, the place of the cremation interment itself remains broad, largely non-descriptive. Both Catholic and non-sectarian cemeteries see cremation as an increasing reality that impacts the preservation of the heritage of their families, their communities and, importantly, their cemeteries.

Scattering and similar dispositions are prohibited for Catholics, yet all cemeteries seek to preserve heritage by opposing disposition of cremated remains on the home fireplace, in a sea, lake or natural area. For the most part,

cremation interments at Catholic cemeteries are found in niches, in or adjacent to mausoleums, or within cemetery plots - sometimes not an option for the 'basic' interment. Newer garden setting options, typical to cremation interment in an increasing number of non-sectarian cemeteries, may be considered as being too sectarian. They often lack traditional art and religious imagery, not reinforcing an association with Christian values.

In the United States the forerunners of cremation interment (Catholic and otherwise) are located in the West and parts of the Midwest.

The Archdiocese of San Francisco reports a cremation rate ranging from 20% to 22% in one cemetery and higher in others, while the Diocese of Phoenix reports a rate of up to 50% in newer cemeteries. In the Midwest, interestingly, the Archdiocese of St. Paul & Minneapolis is seeing cremation among their families increase at an annual rate of 1%, now approaching 25%.

Faced with this surge, and the need to offer a variety of cremation interment options, John Cherek, Director of The Catholic Cemeteries of that Archdiocese, chose to plan, in addition to other traditional cremation options, a uniquely Catholic cremation garden in Gethsemane Cemetery, located in suburban Minneapolis.

The Landplan Design Group, experienced in cremation garden design, was selected to design the garden. In a collaborative process, cemetery management defined the garden's design theme to be The Five Sorrowful Mysteries of the rosary.

After a process of review and interaction between cemetery management and Landplan, a detailed study culminated with a design that will feature variety and Catholic heritage in a subtle, aesthetic context. Merging 30 years of cemetery design with his own Catholicism, Landplan's Neal Bastable guided the unique design to feature each 'mystery' as a separate garden "room" for quiet contemplation. Each mystery 'room' is separated from each other by landscaping and ornamental iron-work gateways, reminiscent of a cloister screen.

The central focal point of the garden is a bronze image of a kneeling Christ in the Garden of Gethsemane. Each mystery area will feature a rough granite sculpture, though somewhat abstract, with a related verse from the gospels.

For example, the 'scourging' sculpture would be an upright rough granite post, perhaps with a brass scourge and a narrow incised red cross as a icon common to all sculptures. Each mystery sculpture setting is to be rough, suggestive of a Middle Eastern setting, essentially a slightly raised rocky area with no landscaping, save a few coarse yucca, in purposeful contrast to the adjacent gardens sequenced for seasonal bloom.

Father James Notebaart, a priest known for his creative design assistance in this Archdiocese and elsewhere, will detail the final sculpture and text. Benches will be strategically placed to encourage contemplation of each mystery.

Cremation gardens are relatively compact - this one to be located in an existing section of Gethsemane Cemetery. It is approximately 140 ft. across, totaling less than 15, 500 sq. ft. The variety of interments will be flexible so as to respond to changing market conditions while offering a wide variety of memorialization options. These options range from the more valued cremation estates and niche columbaria to a variety of flush bronze companion and cremation memorials at various locations. Set within the garden will be ten, higher valued, family 'landscaped estates', permitting four casketed interments and a family monument.

This garden is anticipated to be the first of several cremation gardens in the St. Paul & Minneapolis Archdiocesan cemeteries, likely celebrating other mysteries of the rosary.

In summary, Catholic cemeteries ought to be able to be highly creative bringing creative design beyond the catalog selection process. They can offer their families a variety of interment options that maintain their rich heritage in a cremation garden setting that is artfully and uniquely Catholic. ■

Neal Bastable is President of the Landplan Design Group from Denver, Colorado. The company is a member of the NCCC and has served the cemetery industry since 1975. Their focus is on master and in-fill planning, mausoleum planning, features and site technical design and cremation and estate gardens.

