

Archdiocesan cemetery blesses new garden for cremation remains

New Cathedral Cemetery is home to the remains of Reginald F. Lewis, Abraham Lincoln conspirator John Surratt and four Hall of Fame baseball legends – more than any other cemetery. Mother Mary Lange was there, too, before she was disinterred for the cause of her sainthood.

Those are just a few recognizable names of people who rest in the only cemetery owned by the Archdiocese of Baltimore. New Cathedral Cemetery, located off of Edmonson Avenue, is expanding its offerings to include a new garden which can hold up to approximately 1,200 cremated remains.

The space, formally known as The Garden at New Cathedral, was blessed May 18 by Father Kenneth Uchenwa from St. Joseph's Passionist Monastery in Irvington.

Designed to allow multiple levels of interment options for those looking for a final resting place, the garden has pads paved for six columbaria. Each columbarium has 72 niches able to hold two urns.

Along the pathways to the columbaria are private estate areas, where families can purchase a bench that holds four urns. Each estate has a small pad to step off the common walkway to allow a private space to remember their loved ones.

The pathways through the garden are lined with saplings that will grow into shade-bearing maple trees.

"Cremation is becoming a more popular choice," said Nathan Nardi, director of New Cathedral Cemetery and director of operations for the office of cemetery management.

Nardi said the space can be expanded on both sides of the current garden to allow for expansion if needed. Currently, approximately 97 percent of the 101 acres of the cemetery grounds set aside for burials is used. Woods and a stream occupy 24 acres.

Building spaces for cremated remains, Nardi said, allows New Cathedral to “extend the usefulness” of the cemetery’s acreage by expanding upward.

The Catholic Church has permitted cremation since the 1960s, though traditional burying of the dead remains the preferred practice. Either way, remains must be treated in a respectful manner, and must be interred in consecrated ground.

Father Patrick Carrion, director of the office of cemetery management and pastor of the Catholic Community of South Baltimore, said having a section in the New Cathedral Cemetery gives a clear option to Catholics who choose cremation.

“Catholic cemeteries are consecrated grounds,” Father Carrion said.

He added that it is imperative ashes be treated the same as bodies.

“We should look at the ashes as a sacred body,” Father Carrion said. “We should have the same respect for the ashes.”

There are multiple issues that arise with cremated remains, he said, that Catholics should be careful to avoid. Among them include keeping them in an urn at home, splitting ashes among family members and scattering the ashes.

Father Carrion said that if one would not do something with a body, one should not do it with cremated remains.

Other cemeteries in the archdiocese, including multiple parish cemeteries, have options for cremated remains, Father Carrion said.

Nardi sees his work at the cemetery as a corporal work of mercy. Before entering into a role as cemetery director, he was a funeral director for 17 years. He then moved to a cemetery in Hagerstown before joining the staff of New Cathedral almost two years ago.

“We look at it as caring for those who are mourning,” Nardi said, adding that they strive to keep a cemetery “that’s accessible, that’s maintained well, that’s beautiful.”

Email Emily Rosenthal at erosenthal@CatholicReview.org