

# Iowa Trappists expand casket factory due to increased demand

PEOSTA, Iowa - For the craftsmen and artisans at New Melleray Abbey in Peosta, a relatively new ministry has expanded into a new state-of-the-art, 40,000-square-foot factory, almost five times larger than their previous facility.

“Because of increasing demands for caskets, we were unable to keep up with production to satisfy demand, so we had to develop a new woodworking facility,” said Sam Mulgrew, the operation’s general manager. “It’s not a highly automated factory. It has good dust collection, air quality and other features.”

In their work, the monks strive to produce burial caskets and urns that reflect their values of integrity, simplicity and reverence for nature. They try to nourish a return to a dignified spirituality of death.

Trappist Brother Felix Leja, the first monk designated to make caskets at New Melleray, has made somewhere between 800 and 900 caskets since the venture was officially launched in 2000.

For him, the focus is on doing the work of God, not on his new surroundings. “Work is work,” he told *The Witness*, archdiocesan newspaper in Dubuque, noting that the monks know God loves them no matter where they are working.

The Trappists at New Melleray Abbey follow the ancient monastic rule of St. Benedict, striving for simple living through contemplative prayer, community worship and manual labor.

Mr. Mulgrew sees the casket-making business as an ideal fit for that lifestyle. “They

consider this work to be a corporal act of mercy,” he said of the monks. “Our casket is a serious product in high demand that has sacramental value to it.”

About 30 people work at the factory - 12-15 monks and 15-18 laypeople.

Wood for the caskets and urns comes in part from the monastery’s own sustainable forests. The monks own 1,300 acres of forestland - the second largest privately-owned forest in the state of Iowa, according to Mr. Mulgrew.

As young monks 55 years ago, some of those now working in the new factory planted the pine trees now used to make caskets.

The new factory, designed for the production of 10-12 caskets per day, includes various workstations for making caskets and urns, staining, attaching lids and handles, adding upholstery, custom-engraving and storing.

In addition, a separate workstation has been designated for those monks who prefer to work uninterrupted, allowing them to be reflective and contemplative on the job.

The custom-engraving options, available at additional cost, include a loved one’s name, significant dates, religious symbols, prayers, blessings, poems and quotations.

“One of the trends is a movement toward personalization,” Mr. Mulgrew said. “People want to express their individuality by having a casket engraved or modified to suit them.”

Since moving into the new facility in the fall, the monks and lay employees have been learning how to be most efficient without sacrificing their handcraftsmanship.

“We keep enough inventory to meet any at-need request,” Mr. Mulgrew said. “We can deliver a casket just about anywhere in the country on a next-day basis.”

The Trappists have brokered business relationships with various organizations across the country, including Catholic cemeteries, dioceses and the University of Notre Dame in Indiana.

“We’re the official casket of the University of Notre Dame,” Mr. Mulgrew said. “They are selling our caskets to their alumni, customized specifically for them.”

With the growing demand for the company’s product comes an ongoing sense of urgency to produce more and more caskets and urns. “We continue to sell more caskets than we’re manufacturing,” Mr. Mulgrew said. “There’s a slight grace period there because half our sales are pre-need, but that gap is closing, so we really need to make more caskets.”