

Pope John Paul II prayer garden will be center of prayer

A bustling section of downtown Baltimore is about to get a quiet spot for reflection and meditation when Archbishop Edwin F. O'Brien breaks ground April 11 for the long-awaited Pope John Paul II Prayer Garden.

Located on the site of the former Rochambeau apartment building on Charles Street, the 8,000-square-foot garden will celebrate Pope John Paul II's message of religious freedom, a focus on inter-faith understanding and other themes sounded by the late pontiff during his 1995 visit to Charm City.

The garden's centerpiece will be a 7-foot-tall, 7-foot-wide bronze statue of Pope John Paul II with two children. Inspired by a photograph taken when the pope arrived at BWI Thurgood Marshall International Airport in Baltimore, the artwork will rest on a 2-foot granite base.

"I knew the pope had a great love for children and I wanted to show him as being very kind," said Joseph Sheppard, a Baltimore artist who completed the statue in January at a studio in northern Italy. The art will be shipped to Baltimore when the prayer garden is completed in September, he said.

Mr. Sheppard, whose previous works include a portrait of Pope Benedict XVI, was selected to make the statue in a competition that included artists from Poland and the United States. He had met the pope in the pontiff's later years during a papal audience, but worked mostly from photographs.

Mr. Sheppard said he hopes the statue buoys the spirituality of visitors. He compared it to Baltimore's Holocaust memorial, an artwork he designed that attracts reverent crowds. In an ancient tradition, Jewish visitors often leave prayer stones at the base of the statue, he said.

"I hope the John Paul II statue has that kind of impact," he said.

Scott Rykiel of Mahan Rykiel Associates of Baltimore is the landscape architect for

the \$1.5 million garden. The land will be surrounded by a wrought iron fence similar to the fence around the nearby Basilica of the National Shrine of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary, he said.

Shaped in an ellipse with an entry at the corner of Franklin and Charles streets, the garden will include inscriptions of quotes from Pope John Paul II about religious freedom and Catholicism in Maryland.

“The edge landscaping is done in a garden fashion with flowering plants and shrubs,” said Mr. Rykiel. Depending on the season, an annual display will be planted using the papal colors of yellow and white, along with the red and white of Pope John Paul II’s native Poland. White birch trees similar to those in Poland will also be planted, along with hydrangeas, roses, flowering perennials and other colorful flowers, he said.

A crucifix, Star of David and crescent moon will be displayed on an inscription wall as a “testament to the pope’s reaching out to other faiths,” said Mr. Rykiel. The wall will also bear the archdiocesan and papal seals.

On the wall of a parking garage at the back of the garden, a large mural in four panels will be erected, he said. Designed by RTKL Associates, Baltimore, it will spotlight four panels depicting flowers significant in the Bible – a rose, a lily of the valley, a lily and a marigold. Inspirational quotes about the environment will also be featured.

The street-level garden, which will include a pathway and seating areas, will be lighted at night and will be open during the same hours as the basilica.

“I’d like to see people in it all the time, enjoying a quiet lunch or maybe stopping to say a prayer,” said Mr. Rykiel, a parishioner of the Cathedral of Mary Our Queen in Homeland. “I hope future generations may learn a little something about this great man when they visit.”

Mark Potter, executive director of the Basilica Historic Trust, said the prayer garden will complement the historic basilica – the first Catholic cathedral in the U.S. He expects many thousands of visitors to come to the garden. Mr. Potter noted that

when the Archdiocese of Baltimore originally purchased the land for the basilica from General John Eager Howard in 1804, it included the area where the prayer garden will be located.

“What we’re able to do is bring back the original square block again to fulfilling the mission of the church,” said Mr. Potter. “It really ties together the whole square block as a hub for living out the Gospel.

The block includes the basilica as the “spiritual home,” Mr. Potter said. It will also include the new home for Catholic Charities’ My Sisters’ Place – emphasizing concern for social justice, he said. The prayer garden will serve as a place of respite for the wider community, Mr. Potter added.