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Lay your loved ones to rest the natural way

Rich Heffern | Apr. 21, 2009

Fr. Charles Morris stands in the new ìgreenî section of Mt. Carmel Cemetery in Wyandotte, Mich. (Joe Kohn/The Michigan Catholic)

Mt. Carmel Cemetery, located in Wyandotte, Mich., near Detroit, has become the first U.S. Catholic cemetery to offer a green burial option.

Green burial is a natural process by which a deceased person is laid to rest without embalmment, entombment or the use of non-biodegradable materials. Mt. Carmel Cemetery recently became certified by the Green Burial Council, a New Mexico-based nonprofit that certifies cemeteries and funeral homes nationwide.

The cemetery is considered a ?hybrid? because it also continues to inter people in the traditional way.

The 12-and-a-half-acre cemetery, first used in 1865, will dedicate a half acre to burial without embalming or vaults. Caskets used in the green burial section will be biodegradable, and families will have the option to substitute shrouds, or even a favorite blanket, in place of the casket.

On learning that no other Catholic cemetery in the country offered green burials, Fr. Charles Morris, Mt. Carmel?s administrator, set out to remedy that, and perhaps in the process alter Catholics? views of how to bury the dead.

?There is no more appropriate way to honor our Catholic Christian tradition of Resurrection faith than by fitting into a natural cycle of death and rebirth where we honor both our loved ones and God?s good earth,? said Morris.

?While some may regard this form of burial as odd, remember that Jesus was laid to rest in a shroud without embalming or a burial vault. This has been the way Christians have honored their loved ones throughout most of the church?s 2,000 years.?

?It?s great that Mt. Carmel and other members of the religious community are beginning to take the lead in reclaiming their end-of-life rituals,? said Joe Sehee, executive director of the Green Burial Council, which now

has more than 200 approved death-care providers in its national network, including 26 funeral homes in Michigan.

A green burial is a cremation alternative and a viable alternative to ?traditional? burial practices in the United States, Sehee said. ?It is earth-friendly. Many families choose cremation because it?s seen as more environmentally friendly than traditional burial. Embalming, expensive sealed caskets and burial vaults are not required by law. Though traditional memorial parks may require them, a green cemetery or memorial nature preserve does not.? The simplicity of a green burial is in tune with nature and need not be expensive, according to Sehee.

Morris said, ?We want to make the green burial area at Mt. Carmel a meditative space. Tombstones lay flat on the ground, not upright. We?re installing a rain collection system to water the native Michigan landscaping that will set the green burial plots apart from the rest. We?ve contracted with Heart and Soul Landscaping, a local firm.?

Morris said that it?s also not necessary with a green burial to dig a grave as deep as with a conventional burial. ?We have to dig only three feet. Jute mesh cloth is used and the body decomposes within months.?

It is clear that nature has intended that our bodies be reunited with the earth, said Morris. ?All organisms that have lived have died and returned to the soil, only to be recycled into new life. Constant microbial activity in the soil breaks everything down. Nature creates no waste. Everything is recycled. In a green burial, water is not wasted, nor are pesticides and herbicides used in attempts to control nature. Instead, a green cemetery allows nature take its course. Planting native trees, shrubs and flowers in a loved one?s honor promotes habitat restoration.?

?If you ask people, they don?t want any of this stuff,? said Sehee, referring to the traditional American way of burial. ?Half of what they spend money on is because they think they have to because it?s required by law -- mainly caskets and embalming fluid. That?s really some toxic stuff that no one should be exposed to, let alone put in the ground. And it doesn?t serve any purpose.?

Jim Alexander, sexton of Mt. Carmel Cemetery and a parishioner at Morris? parish, St. Elizabeth, said the green burial section will be noticeably different from the rest of the grounds.

?It?s still new, so we?re working on different types of grasses,? Alexander said. For the sake of families who use the cemetery, he?s happy Mt. Carmel offers green burial.

?Everybody is going to have an option here,? he said.

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