



Father George Heyman tells a group of senior high students how certain placements of columbarium niches were chosen. Jeff Goulding/Courier-Journal

Teens consider touchy topic of cremation

Religious education class tours Fairport parish columbarium

By Teresa A. Parsons

It was an unusual discussion for the week before Christmas, and a downright strange topic for people under the age of 20 to consider.

Perhaps that's why cremation managed to thoroughly capture the attention of nearly 30 senior high religious-education students at the Church of the Assumption in Fairport.

Cremation was the subject of the December 18 final session in a seven-part course on death and dying, offered to ninth through 12th graders. Assumption's associate pastor, Father George Heyman, led students on a tour of the parish's columbarium and outlined the Church's teaching on cremation as well as the details of the procedure.

Although Assumption's columbarium is reported to be the only such burial facility in the United States to be housed within a Catholic church, the tour offered more than a few of the students their first glimpse of the facility.

Located directly behind the church's main altar and adjacent to a small chapel that houses the Blessed Sacrament, the columbarium entrance is marked by a massive glass, bronze and steel door which depicts the tree of life. Sculptor Marte Cellura and stained-glass artist Peter McGrain collaborated to create the door, as well as a bronze wall relief and two living-flame lamps inside. Also inside are 490 niches or square openings in which remains are stored. The niches are covered by plates of Botticino marble imported from Italy.

The term columbarium is derived from the Latin word "columba" or dove, and means house of doves or dovecote, which is similarly divided into small compartments.

Assumption's columbarium cost almost \$50,000 to construct, but could earn the parish nearly 10 times that amount when and if all the niches are sold. So far, 20 people have purchased niches at a cost of \$1,000 each, according to Father John P. Norris, Assumption's pastor. Eleven of the niches, each of which has room for two standard-sized urns, are currently in use.

During the process of planning Assumption's new church building in 1981, a parishioner who had seen a similar facility at St. Thomas Episcopal Church in Rochester suggested including a columbarium.

Father Norris described four stages of reaction among parishioners: "What? Ooooooh! Hey, that ain't a bad idea. Let's do it!"

Designed by architect David F. Miller, the columbarium was opened in March, 1986, with a dedication by Bishop Matthew H. Clark.

As some of his listeners wrinkled their noses or cringed with distaste, Father Heyman explained the process of cremation. A human body, he said, requires about three hours at high temperature to burn completely. Another five hours must pass before the retort, where the bodies are burned, cools down.

Afterward, the "cremains," which are mostly bone, are processed or ground into a fine powder and are placed in a small container or urn. Family members are then free to do almost anything they wish with the ashes, from scattering them or burying them at some favorite outdoor spot to placing them in a columbarium.

"There is no official rite for putting someone in a columbarium," Father Heyman said. "We adapt the prayers for burial in the ground to burial in the columbarium."

Some people choose niches with symbolism in mind. One spouse had her husband's ashes placed at heart level in Assumption's facility. Another chose a niche in the ninth row from the floor and the 15th from the door in memory of the couple's wedding date, September 15.

One of the primary advantages of cremation over traditional burial is cremation's lower cost. If a person opts for immediate cremation the body does not have to be embalmed. Caskets are also optional; however, some families do purchase wooden caskets in which the bodies are cremated.

For surviving spouses and family members, a columbarium is also convenient for visiting after Mass. "For some people, it's very consoling knowing that the Blessed Sacrament is right next door in the tabernacle," Father Heyman added.

Many of the teenagers who toured the columbarium



Marte Cellura's forged iron door adorns the entrance to the columbarium.

seemed to regard cremation as a reasonable option, particularly because of the cost.

"I think that it's about time people took a more sensible approach to death," senior Renee Serbu remarked afterward. Continued on Page 4

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