

CEM Profile

By Lauren Moore



A bird's eye view of the Holy Cross Cemetery Mausoleum in North Arlington, N.J. (Photo courtesy of the Archdiocese of Newark)

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There's certainly no shortage of art museums and galleries in the Northeast. New York City alone boasts some of the most popular collections of art in the world, but just 10 miles west of the city, Holy Cross Cemetery in North Arlington, N.J., is also sure to attract art lovers from all over.

Home to what will soon be the largest Catholic mausoleum in the country, Holy Cross Cemetery is embarking on a \$20 million expansion of its already sizable building, which will contain 35,747 burial spaces and 90 major works of art. The mausoleum was originally established in 1979, and over the years, it's become more popular, according to Joseph Verzi, assistant executive director of the Catholic Cemeteries of the Archdiocese of Newark, which operates Holy Cross

Cemetery. "In the beginning, less than 5 percent of families chose the mausoleum. Thirty-five percent of burials are in the mausoleum now," he said. "Through the years we've had to expand the program, and now we're doing the last addition to the building."

Part of the expansion project will include six mosaic murals depicting the Book of Genesis – namely, the six days in which God created the world. Verzi said the Book of Genesis can be hard to depict. "You don't see too much

artwork that is designed from Genesis," he said.

The Rev. Thomas Dente, director of the archdiocesan Office of Divine Worship, came up with the idea to depict scenes from the Book of Genesis. "I think it's a nice way to tie in creation and the divine. People are becoming more and more concerned with the environment, they love nature and the world, and it's a nice way to tie the two together," Dente said.

Dente added that, in many of the

archdiocese's mausoleums, there is a scriptural or religious "theme" that ties into the artwork. In Holy Cross' mausoleum there is a chapel, which features a crucifix and artwork depicting Adam and Eve at the tree of life. "The whole idea is to say, we were created by God, we lost our way, and Christ showed us the way back so we could enter heaven," he said. "That's the story the building tells, and the mosaics are a key part of that."

The mosaics were designed by Alexander and Daniela Mandradjiev, a husband and wife team from Alexander Studios in Southern California, who spent approximately 1,350 hours on the first two mosaics and, at Alexander's estimation, have used more than 1,800 different colors to illustrate the scenes. He expects that all six mosaics will be completed by the end of the year. Although Alexander has designed works of art for cemeteries for years, he said depicting the scenes from Genesis is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. "Right now, we are doing the greatest project ever in our lives," he said.

"Families who visit the cemetery love artwork, they love when it's colorful, and we try to make the artwork uplifting," Verzi explained. He added that one of the reasons cemeteries exist is so people have an environment where they are welcome to visit – and having a mausoleum, which is sheltered from the elements, enables the cemetery to provide an environment that's friendly to many people. "Years ago, cemeteries were the first parks," Verzi said. "In New York there were no parks, and no park system. There wasn't one in New Jersey, either. So cemeteries became parks. And artists of the day were saying, this is an opportunity to show off our artwork."

In older cemeteries, Verzi explained,

there are intricately carved statues that serve to memorialize the dead through art. "We're just taking that whole idea, bringing it inside and giving artists the opportunity to depict something beautiful, and creates an environment that makes people comfortable when they're coming to visit or pray for the dead," he said.

In addition to family members visiting and praying for their deceased loved ones, Verzi said students in schools in the area visit and learn about the art. "We use the opportunity to evangelize as well," he added.

The concept of using artwork as evangelization and educational tools goes back centuries, to a time when many people were illiterate. "If you wanted to teach something, you had to do it pictorially," Verzi explained. "You could tell them stories, but the easiest way (to teach) was through artwork. Major, great artists worked for the church because churches needed (stained-glass) windows and mosaics – that was the way to tell the story of the Bible to people who couldn't read."

While Verzi explained that there are few new churches or museums today because building them is expensive, expanding the Holy Cross Cemetery mausoleum was a way to combine that concept with something people wanted to purchase. About 50 percent of the spaces in the mausoleum have remains

in them, and 80 percent of spaces are chosen ahead of time. "When people are choosing, they say, 'I'd like to be near this mosaic, or that saint,'" he explained.

Verzi believes the cemetery is a "place of hope," and that people say artwork makes their visitations more enjoyable. "We see a lot more children," Verzi said. "People will bring their kids just to show them the artwork in the cemeteries." He hopes to have the renovations to the building completed and open to the public by the fall. •



Top: The mosaics, designed by Alexander and Daniela Mandradjiev, depict the six days of creation from the Book of Genesis. Bottom: The completed mausoleum will contain 35,747 burial spaces. (Photos courtesy of the Archdiocese of Newark)