

BLESSING A PLACE MEANT FOR GRIEF AND INSPIRATION

By Kristen Hannum
OF THE CATHOUC SENTINEL

HAPPY VALLEY —Out in St. Peter's garden at Gethsemani Cemetery last month, Charlotte Benfiet cleaned and polished her husband's marble headstone. It bears her name as well, and a photo of the two on their 50th anniversary. Her husband, Sebastian Benfiet, died in 2011.

"We spent time together here," she says. "It's so peaceful."

Benfiet caught a ride out to the cemetery from her home near St. Rita Parish in Northeast Portland (she doesn't drive) with St. Rita's pastoral administrator, Lisa Porter, who was coming for the July 20 blessing of Gethsemani's new funeral home. As Benfiet sat on a bench near her husband's grave, Eric Thomas, on staff at Gethsemani Cemetery and its new funeral home, was giving tours inside. He explained how all the behind-the-scenes systems work: the crematorium, as yet unused; the processor, into which ashes from the crematorium and bones the consistency of brittle ceramic are processed to a dust; the embalming morn with its sinks and steel pallet; the metal-lined walk-in cooler: and the garage where the long black hearse parks. Up front are displays of headstones, private meetings rooms, office space and a beautiful wood-paneled chapel.

Chris LoNigro, lead architect from Di Loreto Architecture, who was also at the blessing, said one of the challenges he met was crafting a place suitable for people who were grieving and yet also making it a place where people could come to work every day and feel up-lifted rather than de-pressed. An example of that is in the embalming room, which has windows providing natural light.

Archbishop Alexander Sample, in his blessing, spoke to that as well.

"The Father of mercies and the God of all consolation, who strengthens us through his Son and the Holy Spirit, showers his love and blessing in a particular way on those who are mourning the loss of a loved one and on those who minister to them in any way," he said. "Let us ask for God's blessing on all those who will be ministered to

here, for those who grieve and for those who devote them-selves to preparing our beloved dead for burial." The archbishop then walked throughout the building and sprinkled holy water. In his remarks before the blessing, Archbishop Sample thanked Tim Corbett, director of Catholic cemeteries for the archdiocese; Bishop Peter Smith, responsible for funerals and cemeteries in the archdiocesan curia; and others involved in shepherding the new funeral home to opening.

"I've been a priest for 27 years now," the archbishop said. During that time, he learned personally and heard from other priests about the importance of working, from the very beginning, with families who had lost a loved one. He spoke of the importance of helping people through grief, the funeral and burial of their loved one "enshrouded, if you will, in a Catholic ethos. ... So, I'm so proud that we in the Archdiocese of Portland now have our own funeral home where we can work closely with our parishes, with our pastors and with our faithful in making this truly a spiritual experience from the beginning." kristenh@catholicsentine.org