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Monks Go Green

An Atlanta-area monastery looks to "green burials" to sustain a cloistered lifestyle

by [Gabrielle Coppola](#)

Father Francis Michael, abbot of Our Lady of the Holy Spirit Monastery, spends his days watching the birds, butterflies, and dragonflies that inhabit the order's grounds about 30 miles east of downtown Atlanta. In August, the monks of Our Lady of the Holy Spirit broke a state record by spotting 59 butterfly species in a single day.

Such contemplative activity is occupying less of Father Francis' time these days. With many of the order's 45 brothers now in their 60s, 70s, and 80s, health-care costs have surged, forcing the monastery to employ outsiders to complete tasks the monks once performed. Since the monastery's founding in 1944, the monks have undertaken a series of entrepreneurial ventures, from hay farming, to raising ostriches and emus, to baking bread.

In their latest round of entrepreneurialism, Father Francis and his fellow Cistercian brothers are hiring an outside company to convert 30 acres of clear-cut pine plantation into a "conservation burial ground," and perform "green burials"—interments without embalming and with biodegradable caskets or urns, or simply a shroud, instead of cement and steel caskets. The monks, who have 2,200 acres, plan to charge \$3,000 to \$4,000 per plot and sell plants and engraving works. Father Francis hopes the green venture will appeal to monastery visitors of all faiths and enable the monks to obey their sixth century mandate to be self-sufficient, a goal that has eluded them in recent years. The order's "community costs" were \$1.6 million last year, up from \$700,000 a decade earlier, with most of the rise attributable to health-care expenses.

A SUSTAINABLE BUSINESS MODEL?

"One could, in a big monastery, fall into being a CEO instead of a monk, because you have a big operation that you have to manage and make sure survives," Francis says. "I'm trying to not get into a mindset where I think this is a silver bullet that's going to solve everything. It'd be nice, but we've tried too many other things that weren't that."

The monks' green burial venture is the latest sign of just how far and wide the greening of American business has spread. That an order of monks so strict it once communicated by hand signal has partnered with eco-entrepreneurs shows how no corner of the nation's economy is sheltered from the enticement of green marketing and "cause-based" consumption.

Green burial is still very much in its infancy in the U.S., and whether it can work as a sustainable business model remains to be seen. The U.S. has five exclusively green cemeteries so far—in Florida, New Mexico, New York, South Carolina, and Texas—yet they do not all adhere to the same environmental standards.

STRUGGLING TO KEEP UP WITH QUERIES

Ramsey Creek Preserve, a conservation burial ground in Westminster, S.C., that is teaming up with the monks to develop the Georgia grounds, expects to earn about \$150,000 in 2007, the second profitable year in its eight-year history. Of course, it is not unusual for a new business to take time to recoup its startup costs, and traditional cemeteries often take even longer—entry costs for just a five-acre piece of land can range from \$250,000 to \$500,000.

While market size and penetration are speculative at this point, early surveys show that baby boomers are particularly open to green burials. The Green Burial Council, a New Mexico nonprofit that monitors and promotes "environmentally sustainable death-care practices," says its Web site averages 120,000 hits a month and that it struggles to keep pace with consumer queries. Most people are motivated by the contribution to conservation that green burial fosters. But as rising cremation rates demonstrate, some consumers are turned off by the bells and whistles of ornate funerals and the perceived price-gouging at funeral homes. The council's executive director, Joe Sehee, says 40 funeral providers across the country have signed on to offer its standardized green burial package.

"We're trying to get conservationists and the death-care industry to get on board with each other," Sehee says. "The funeral industry is leery of the consumer movement if they feel like they're threatening them, and if the green thing is perceived as only owned by the death-care industry, you won't get buy-in from consumers...this thing could get greenwashed down the drain if it's not done right."

MONKS BURY THEIR OWN IN SIMPLE SHROUDS

Some segments already opt for simple burials, avoiding ornate caskets and embalmed preservation. Orthodox Jews and Muslims have long practiced "natural burial"—without embalming and using only shrouds or wooden caskets—and the monks bury their own in simple shrouds.

Harry Echols, a 66-year-old Atlanta resident who was diagnosed with terminal cancer six months ago, has purchased a plot and will likely be the first person to be buried in the monks' new cemetery. "I came from a very large family...so I saw funerals at an early age, and the one thing that I

thought was so false was this embalming business," Echols says. "I looked around most of my life, telling my friends and family I didn't want all those trappings...and all of a sudden, here it is. God has provided exactly what I wanted in a location that I have a great deal of respect for."

The Holy Spirit Monastery is partnering with Billy and Kimberley Campbell, whose South Carolina preserve was the first conservation burial ground in the country, and the only one so far to be certified by the Green Burial Council. The monks are taking the high road by opting for the more rigorous plan of creating a conservation burial ground, which requires a federal land easement to ensure the property can never be commercially developed, biological and geological evaluations, and special attention to native and locally rare plants. Certified "natural burial grounds" don't require an easement or the participation of a conservation organization as a long-term steward of the land.

SOME SKEPTICAL FUNERAL PROFESSIONALS

Billy Campbell says "memorial gifting," or donations given to the preserve in lieu of flowers, is a big part of his revenue stream at Ramsey Creek, and will probably be even more so for the monks. "As a nonprofit, mainstream religious institution, they may be the ones that make it [green burial] O.K.," Campbell says. "We've been out there and we've been working really hard, but I think these monks will do more for green burial than 10 other places."

While some in the funeral profession are skeptical about the feasibility of green cemeteries—margins are unquestionably lower when you don't sell expensive caskets—the monks' nonprofit status and ownership of the property may help. They also have other resources they can leverage, including 70,000 annual visitors who come to stay in their retreat house, pray in the hand-built church, and buy religious trinkets at the gift shop. The monastery is currently planning a \$12 million capital campaign to expand the shop, build a monastic museum and café, and a new eco-friendly retreat house. They're also hoping a new state heritage park and bike trail that ends at the entrance to the monastery will boost the number of visitors to their peaceful haven.

The recent wave of Latino immigrants to the South has brought a new base of faithful Catholics who come to the monastery on a regular basis. On a recent Saturday afternoon, the Abbey Store was bustling with visitors buying prayer books, crucifixes, and the monks' homemade Georgia peach fudge. Miguel Caraballo, a 67-year-old retired textile factory owner from Hickory, N.C., was one of the customers in line. He moved to the U.S. from Puerto Rico a half century ago, and has been visiting the monastery since 1992.

"If we continue doing what we're doing to the earth, we're going to destroy everything. God, in little ways, is changing it," Caraballo says. "When I die, I don't want to go back to my country. I would love to be buried here."

Coppola is a reporter for BusinessWeek.com in New York.

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