

THE CATHOLIC PARISH CEMETERY

Meeting Challenges *e* Recognizing Opportunities

Grave Diggers

Somewhere in the folklore/history of the United States is the character **Digger Odell**. In a radio format, he was a comedic undertaker. Elsewhere he was the town drunk who would be paid a paltry sum to dig graves at the local cemetery, a sporadic task no one wanted as it didn't provide a constant paycheck upon which a man could earn a living and reasonably support a family.

Fast forward; while we still have negative residue about grave digging, a wonderful group of new and different people now perform the task of the burial of the dead. Today we find both men and women engaged in this work. Today the work is usually coupled with cemetery maintenance and thus affords employees a dignified and reliable income with which to support self and family.

Because of the recognition of the evangelical nature of the Catholic cemetery, isn't it about time to dignify the grave digger? Isn't it time to add a different type of training for those who perform this task and oftentimes find themselves interacting with the bereaved who visit the Catholic cemetery to pray for their beloved?

These are individuals who console the bereaved, bring them comfort and hope in a place where they otherwise would find no hope and perhaps only painful memories. Pastors and those in diocesan leadership, especially those working in bereavement/grief support, should be both asked and encouraged to offer support and workshops for grave diggers as front line representatives of the Catholic church and perhaps the best of consolers and potential evangelizers.



The Catholic Cemetery Tradition

Catholic cemeteries trace their roots back to the Jewish practice of providing separate burial grounds for community members. The early Christians continued this practice, both because it was a familiar tradition, and also because it was a statement of faith about the dignity of the human body in death and the reality of Jesus' resurrection.

At death we focus on Baptism and the body as a temple of the Holy Spirit, nourished at the Eucharistic table. Rooted in that recognition, we remember our beloved and give thanks for the life we shared. When we visit the burial sites of our loved ones, we experience the same Eucharistic dynamic. Oftentimes we recognize the need for reconciliation with our beloved dead and prayer at the cemetery is an effective approach toward healing.

Catholic cemeteries manifest the "now/not yet" status of the Kingdom of God. We are now a people of history, a people redeemed but still in pain and sorrow. This is why we pray as Jesus did, "Thy Kingdom come..."

We are a people who visit our cemeteries to be reminded of our history, our Catholic beliefs and practices, and our parish community/family. We, as a community, profess our beliefs and value system... even in the silence of the grave.

In the Catholic parish cemetery, our deceased relatives and friends are laid to rest among members of the same faith community who preceded them into eternal life, and professed the same sure conviction that one day the body will be reunited with the soul in glory to be with the Risen Lord. Then the kingdom of God will be fully realized.

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Painful as it might be, family and friends are encouraged to return to the burial places to find there, in the presence of those mortal remains, people joined with the ***Communion of Saints***. The church invites you to unite in prayer for their eternal rest. In the stillness of the cemetery, may you connect with that great prayer of the early Church, “Marana tha!” “Lord Jesus, come!”

Editor’s Note: *This article is suitable for publication in a parish cemetery bulletin and can be copied without permission for this purpose in any parish which receives this Newsletter either in hard copy or electronic format. It would be especially appropriate around Easter.*

The Reality of Life after Death

On the 17th of May 1979, the Vatican’s **Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith** published ***Certain Questions Concerning Eschatology***. In the Fall of the same year **Origins** reprinted the document under the title ***The Reality of Life After Death***. The document appears as **Appendix II** in the **Administration** manual of **The Toolbox for Parish Cemeteries**.

For the purpose of teaching what the Catholic church believes about death and life after death, we’ve taken the language of the document and simplified the seven somewhat lengthy beliefs into nine statements that are more easily able to be understood and articulated by the average lay Catholic; these have been incorporated into the various seminars we’ve taught for those who have responsibility for parish cemeteries in a number of different (arch)dioceses throughout the United States. The abbreviated and simplified statements are as follows:

1. The Church believes in the resurrection of the dead.
2. The Church understands this resurrection to be of the whole person.
3. The Church affirms that the soul survives and exists after death and the soul is endowed with both consciousness and will.
4. The Church affirms the value of all forms of prayer for the dead.
5. The Church affirms the Second Coming of Jesus Christ, i.e. His Glorious Manifestation at the end of time.
6. The Church teaches the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary as an anticipation of the destiny of all believers.
7. The Catholic church believes and teaches the existence of Heaven as the eternal reward for the just.
8. The Church believes and affirms the existence of Hell as eternal punishment for the unrepentant sinner.
9. The Church believes and affirms Purgatory as the possibility of purification of the elect before they see God.

For those who are looking for appropriate material for a bulletin insert (or even better, a seminar during the Lenten observance). Perhaps the original document or these simplified statements from the seven expanded ones in the document might even be good homily topics. In our adult education teaching experiences while a parish director of religious education in the 1970s, it was common to have participants easily identify all of these beliefs. An interesting test would be to see how many Catholics of different age groups could do that today.

THE TOOLBOX FOR PARISH CEMETERIES

One of the major purposes of this newsletter is to promote **The Toolbox for Parish Cemeteries**. It is the only comprehensive treatment of the parish cemetery apostolate in existence or available today. Among the reasons for writing/publishing The ToolBox are promoting Catholic cemetery burial under the best possible ministerial service, assuring that parish cemeteries are properly managed and maintained, recruiting and training interested lay parishioners for service as directors, secretaries, treasurers, grounds superintendents, and board members. The order form for **The ToolBox** is available in this issue of the newsletter. While it is not necessary to order the complete set, it is highly recommended! Consider the **Administration** manual of **The ToolBox** as a recruitment device for new members to a parish cemetery board. Also consider it as an updating/ educational support for existing parish council and parish cemetery board.



About the author

Unless otherwise noted, articles appearing in this newsletter are written by Joseph B. Sankovich. He is semi-retired after a 45-year career in the Catholic cemetery apostolate, meeting the Catholic cemetery needs of 40 client (arch)dioceses. Additional biographic details are available at www.sankovich.com.

I have a question/comment

The goal of this publication is to make it as responsive to the needs of those who administer or care in any other way for Catholic parish cemeteries. If you have a comment, suggestion, or question of general interest to pastors, managers, superintendents or board members, please submit it to Joe@Sankovich.com and every effort will be made to address it in a future edition of the newsletter.

CLOSED PARISH CEMETERIES

Today cremation is permitted, although not the preference, for Catholics. Given the variety of cremation interment possibilities should any Catholic parish cemetery be labeled and treated as closed and no longer open to interments?



We offer two considerations. First, from our experience with over 1,200 Catholic parish cemeteries throughout the United States, when a parish cemetery is identified and labeled as closed, that typically means that it is for all intents and purposes abandoned and not maintained to even a minimal level. If we want to continue teaching by our interment practices that we believe in the dignified interment of all believers, then this practice requires remedies.

Second, in so many instances these closed and abandoned cemeteries are not only forgotten, but they are also without endowment funds for proper repairs and maintenance.



Cremation opens possibilities for families with heritage in these closed parish cemeteries. It is possible to consider second or third interment rights in existing grave spaces. It is also possible to examine interment records for large family plots to see if any graves therein have not either been used or reserved for future use.

Finally, because the design of a columbarium is so flexible, surely there must be room for one or more of various sizes and configurations within the closed parish cemetery.

And, in all these situations, it is possible to either initiate or increase the endowment for the care of the closed parish cemetery so that proper repairs and maintenance can take place.

Another Foundational Consideration

Over the course of 40+ years working with Catholic parish cemeteries, there has been plenty of time and multiple opportunities to think and write some thoughts about essential fundamentals for those who give themselves to this apostolate. These **Basic Assumptions** appear in the ***Policies and Procedures*** manual of the **ToolBox for Parish Cemeteries**. Pastors, parish and cemetery business managers, cemetery superintendents and sextons, cemetery sales counselors and bookkeepers, parish and cemetery board members would all be well served in both reading and discussing these five basic building blocks. Additional information is available in the above-cited manual.

- 1. The operation of a Catholic cemetery is a ministry.** One of the ***Corporal Works of Mercy*** is the ***Burial of the Dead***; it can be accomplished without cemetery ownership. The Catholic cemetery, however, gives silent witness to what the Church believes and teaches about the dignity of the human body and the respect it commands upon death.
- 2. The operation of a Catholic cemetery is a business reality.** To function as a business, there must be sound management principles, efficient operations, safety and insurance, effective human resources policies, timely and complete financial information, and a long-range view for development.
- 3. Catholic cemetery ministry is primarily exercised as a lay apostolate.** This is especially true in the parish environment where ordained clergy have multiple tasks that require ordination to perform; the parish cemetery also benefits from the expertise of parishioners who have family members interred in the parish cemetery.
- 4. People managing or working in the Catholic cemetery must perceive their role as a commitment to ministerial service.** Without all involved in the parish cemetery apostolate understanding lay ecclesial ministry, the words ***ministerial service*** have no meaning and no visibility in this apostolate. Teaching and training are required! Catholic cemeteries are truly an opportunity to become the steady comforting shoulder of the Lord who comforts the bereaved and offers them resurrection hope.
- 5. The parish with parochial cemetery responsibility is committed to fiscal integrity, and long-term management and operational stability of the parish cemetery.** Among the concerns are sufficient finances to manage, operate, maintain, develop, and continue care once all spaces in the facility are depleted. While the parish cemetery must be able to pay for space, personnel and utilities for a parish office, it cannot be used to support other parish needs unless it is properly funded and endowed.

In examining these possibilities it will be necessary to examine the current condition of fences, gates and large trees to assure that those who wish to inter in these facilities will be able to both attend committal services and return for prayer/visitation. While it should not be necessary to state, nonetheless we will remind our readers that abandoned/closed parish cemeteries are still owned by the parish or diocese and dangerous situations within them create a significant liability that requires immediate and continual attention.

MAILING LIST INFORMATION

Your parish has received this Newsletter in hard copy format based on a list of all Catholic Parishes in the United States that have either a parish cemetery designation [PC] or joint parish cemetery designation [JC] in the P.J. Kenedy ***Official Catholic Directory***, most recent edition. If the listing is incorrect, the only way to remedy the situation is to contact the office in your own diocese that prepares/submits/maintains the files submitted to P.J. Kenedy each year.

THE CATHOLIC PARISH CEMETERY

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