

The Catholic Cemetery/ Funeral Home Question—Observations

By Joseph B. Sankovich

It is almost ten months since Dad died suddenly. With Mom having died fourteen years earlier, decisions fell to the six children. Of course there were the usual issues concerning funeral home, clothing, music, obituary. The cemetery was a foregone conclusion: the Catholic cemetery of the parish where Dad grew up, where Mom is buried, where other generations of family members have been laid to rest awaiting final resurrection and reunion with one another and our God.

Those were the easy decisions. The most difficult one revolved around the number of days for the waking of his body as we were faced with the issue of Memorial Day weekend. We had to settle for one afternoon and one evening so that the Funeral Mass could be celebrated on Saturday rather than having to wait until the following Tuesday.

Was the time devoted to the Wake, the Funeral Mass with his body present, the Committal Service in the Catholic cemetery worthwhile? It would seem that this might be the question that many are asking as news items about the Church's cemeteries continue to receive press in both secular and religious outlets.

In our instance as family, the time was powerfully healing, personally enriching, an opportunity to experience the paradigm of Eucharist throughout Vigil, Funeral Mass, Committal Service and the journeys from site to site where these liturgies were celebrated. There was memory and thanksgiving . . . and at the beginning of the experience of so many memories, time set aside for reconciliation.

There was reconciliation to the reality of a sudden and untimely death; there were family hurts to heal; there was a future to face: how to integrate both faith and the diversity of its expression into the way we would, as a faith-filled family, take leave of one who lived his faith in generous service to others. Through it all, we were supported and strengthened by so many who knew him, loved him, worked with him.

Because members of our family are well-versed in what the church, the funeral home, and the cemetery have to offer and have been full participants in the Church's liturgical life, we were able to take advantage of the Church's centuries of experience in evolving a meaningful funeral liturgy; the structure met our needs to remember, to forgive, to pray, to celebrate, to take leave, to heal, to share, to comfort, to grow deeper into the mysteries of life, death, life after death. Parish, family, funeral home, and Catholic cemetery, with the people present at and ministering within each, were essential to

our experience. The totality of the experience, however, could not have been available to us without our being aware of the possibilities inherent in each element.

Contemporary Dilemmas

We continue to read about the new and seemingly strange things that are happening in our Catholic cemetery tradition today; we are aware of the ever-increasing take over of independent funeral homes by large stockholder/public corporations. We are aware of efforts by the large conglomerate operations to insert themselves into both the sales and administrative functions of Catholic diocesan cemeteries. Recently we read about the anticipated construction of funeral homes in the Catholic cemeteries of the Archdiocese of Los Angeles. What does it mean? How will Catholic families be better served?

Again the conglomerates are making news by involvement in the management of the Catholic cemeteries of the Diocese of Tucson in Arizona. A press release by Service Corporation International just announced their gift of a new bishop's suite at the North American College in Rome. Was it truly a gift—or a thinly veiled attempt to purchase influence in potential Catholic cemetery projects.

Efforts abound which are attempting to convince Bishops, Directors of Finance, Diocesan Finance and Presbyteral Councils of the wisdom of the conglomerate operators providing these services. We are left to wonder whether they are in fact services which benefit the Catholic faithful, the Catholic cemeteries, the 150+ dioceses with active Catholic cemetery programs, the image of the Church, and the lives and commitments of so many who have given their lives to the building of the Catholic Cemetery Tradition in the United States and Canada. In the United States alone there are some six thousand parish cemeteries and hundreds of larger diocesan and joint parish cemeteries.

The question that ultimately must be faced is who is best equipped to exercise the ministry of Catholic cemeteries and the Corporal Work of Mercy of the Burial of the Dead? Would it be those who have an understanding of and commitment to the Church's longstanding ministry of paracelsis/catechesis/evangelization? Could it be those who come out of corporate America, with stockholders clamoring for larger returns on investment?

The pressure upon those who exercise the ministry of Catholic cemeteries is not new. Non-sectarian for-profit cemetery operators long ago saw the profit potential in Catholics (in the years when there was no opportunity to

cremate and the Catholic funeral traditionally included two days of viewing and trips to the church and cemetery). Non-sectarian cemetery operators have continued to turn their pre-need counselors loose on Catholics, oftentimes telling unsuspecting families that the church "no longer cares where Her members are buried." Of course that deception gave way to one just as blatant, i.e. the creation of "Catholic sections" in non-sectarian cemeteries when the Catholic church neither requested nor needed them.

So, today's news is the same, the players are simply from larger organizations and therefore the pressure is far more intense. What seems to be troubling, however, is the apparent ready audience that these operators have in certain chancery offices around the country.

In 1966, with the close of the Second Vatican Council, the American bishops returned to the United States and relaxed both Friday abstinence and the mandate for Catholics to be buried in Catholic cemeteries. Up until that time, those who had been baptized as Catholic, who were married in the Church, who made their "Easter duty", were entitled to be buried in the consecrated ground of the Church's cemeteries.

When the discipline changed, there was no new theology for the existence and benefit of Catholic cemeteries in the post-Vatican II Church. Thirty years later, with

the Church's cemeteries losing perhaps 1% of those entitled to burial in Catholic cemeteries each year, the loss stands at over 30% in many dioceses. Break-even is rapidly approaching and many diocesan finance officers are confronted with the profit/loss question.

Perhaps that is one of the contemporary difficulties. In days past, the Diocesan Director of Cemeteries reported directly to the Diocesan Ordinary. The Bishop had a balanced vision of finance and ministry and would thus conclude that the ministerial benefits of Catholic cemeteries were the outweighing factor. Today, the supervisor of the Director of Cemeteries is oftentimes the Director of Finance, an individual with a "bottom line focus", perhaps not appreciating the ministerial dimensions of programs like Catholic cemetery ministry.

Cemetery administration has become even more difficult in the ensuing days following the conclusion of the Second Vatican Council. While the questions confronting the Diocesan Cemetery Director in early days involved building of cemeteries, careful administration of the

Church's Code of Canon Law, and the issue of clergy celebrating unauthorized committal services in non-sectarian cemeteries, today's questions are far more complex.

The Diocesan Director of Catholic Cemeteries must face the question of competition. The Director must address the pre-need phenomenon. While Catholic cemeteries were known in times past for simple burial facilities and practices, today's Catholic cemetery must provide chapel and garden mausoleums, cremation niches and gardens, upright monuments and flush marker area, personnel systems and procedures to insure conformity to state and federal law, rules and regulations that comply with the demands of OSHA at both federal and state levels, pastoral and public relations programs, computer systems for records and financial management, and marketing programs that are informational/ministerial and not high-pressure, large ticket item order-taking.

Those who administer the Church cemeteries must be versed in the variety of questions surrounding cremation, including scattering or co-mingling of cremated remains; they must be involved in assisting families and clergy when clergy are stretched to the breaking point. They must continue to develop a vision of the ministry of Catholic cemeteries into the next millennium and provide for that ministry. In doing so, they must convince not only families, but clergy and diocesan officials, including the bishops, of the worth and tremendous potential that this ministry has for the building up of the Church, the Kingdom of God until Christ comes to pre-

sent it to the Father whole and complete.

Do our Catholic cemeteries have benefit? If so, what do they contribute to the building of the Kingdom of God and the Church? At the heart of a Catholic's belief system is resurrection faith, a firm belief that Jesus Christ is risen from the dead, that He has promised that one day we will be with Him and our beloved family members to enjoy the Kingdom prepared for us from all eternity.

Through a ministry comprised of *paraclesis*, catechesis, and evangelization, Catholic cemeteries make manifest that reality. In the quiet stillness of the graves of those who have preceded us in faith, we hear the prayer of the early Church, *marana tha*, "Lord Jesus! Come!" Those who work within the Church's cemetery system have the opportunity to awaken the reality of that belief every day through their careful exercise of the ministry of comfort, *paraclesis*.

Families filled with the grief of loss are able to find comfort in the knowledge that the Church is present to them in its cemetery system, with people carefully

trained to support them through the journey from grief to healing. Healing takes place in remembrance and prayer for the deceased as well as ourselves, most often at the cemetery itself. The prayerful environment of the Catholic cemetery can be of great assistance in building faith.

Every day Catholics and their family members come to the Church's cemeteries and have the opportunity to learn about the Catholic Cemetery Tradition. Through the ministry of *catechesis* they learn that those who are buried together in the Church's cemeteries continue to give witness to their faith community or family. They learn about the dignity of the baptized, communion of saints, the forgiveness of sin, the resurrection of the dead, life everlasting, the worth of prayer for the dead, vicarious suffering, remembrance and healing, the importance of a life of thanksgiving for the gift of life, especially a life lived in faith.

At the same time, those outside of our believing community come to know the Catholic church and its belief system as they pass by our cemeteries, join friends and family at our liturgical services, receive information about Catholic cemeteries and funerals through their Catholic associates and family members. Through a ministry of *evangelization*, the Church's beliefs about life, death, life after death, equality before our God come to life for these individuals.

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On the one hand we all must recognize that there are essential business aspects to the successful operation of Catholic cemeteries, whether these be small parish cemeteries or large diocesan facilities. On the other hand, however, we also recognize that there is a blossoming awareness of the dimension of ministerial service that we are just now visioning and putting into place in many diocesan facilities. We have yet to make major inroads into the smaller parish cemeteries with information about how to expand this essentially lay ministry beyond simply selling burial rights and maintaining the properties and the records.

Under the pressures of this day with its severe challenges, how can we preserve our Catholic Cemetery Tradition and awaken all of its potential in the contemporary Church and world? Does the involvement of the cemetery/funeral home conglomerate in Catholic cemeteries

or in the ever-expanding reach of their own facilities have a negative impact on the Church Cemetery Tradition and Funeral Liturgy? I would submit that they do.

How? In many ways. Consider only two possibilities:

- 1) Destroying the separate elements of the funeral liturgy and compressing their expression into a one-stop shopping and ritual experience by having funeral homes on cemetery properties takes away from essential elements of our Catholic funeral and grieving experience.
- 2) Increasing prices, introducing high-pressure selling, dismissing from Catholic cemetery staffs those with compassion and a commitment to ministerial service, undermines everything that has been built up to this point and creates an image of Church as a for-profit organization trading on the weak emotions of those in a bereaved state.

I am sure that, as the days move forward, and those who have surrendered their Catholic cemeteries to the management, sales, or funeral home combinations of the conglomerates or other for-profit organizations, we will begin to see other demonstrations of the unnecessary destruction of this valuable ministry in the Church.

Can we still have a positive impact on Catholic cemeteries for the good of families, the parishes, the Dioceses and the Catholic church in the pluralistic environment of the United States and Canada? Of course we can! Some possibilities for consideration:

- 1) What happens in the ministry of Catholic cemeteries in one diocese impacts many others. If this ministry is to have the opportunity to blossom to its full potential then it might be advisable for the National Conference of Catholic Bishops to establish, at least temporarily, an office for Catholic Cemetery and Funeral issues within the organization of the NCCB, staffing it with one or more individuals able to grasp both the potential for good within the Church's cemeteries and the inherent dangers of the contemporary scene.
- 2) Collaborating with a substantial and diverse group of bishops representative of different areas of the United States, first tasks might include development of a contemporary Catholic cemetery theology and communication vehicles at the highest levels of diocesan administration to insure that both ministry and business considerations are present when cemetery/funeral home decisions are being made.
- 3) Training, under the sponsorship of the National Catholic Cemetery Conference, of a whole new group of people who can be formed over time to carry forward this ministry. While the International Cemetery and Funeral Association offers courses in cemetery administration, grounds operations, and sales, the Catholic Cemetery Conference has the opportunity to compliment those offerings by training Catholic cemetery administrators and family service counselors in the key concepts of ministry and service under the auspices of the Church. Invitations need to be

widely extended to those who might find this work both rewarding and challenging.

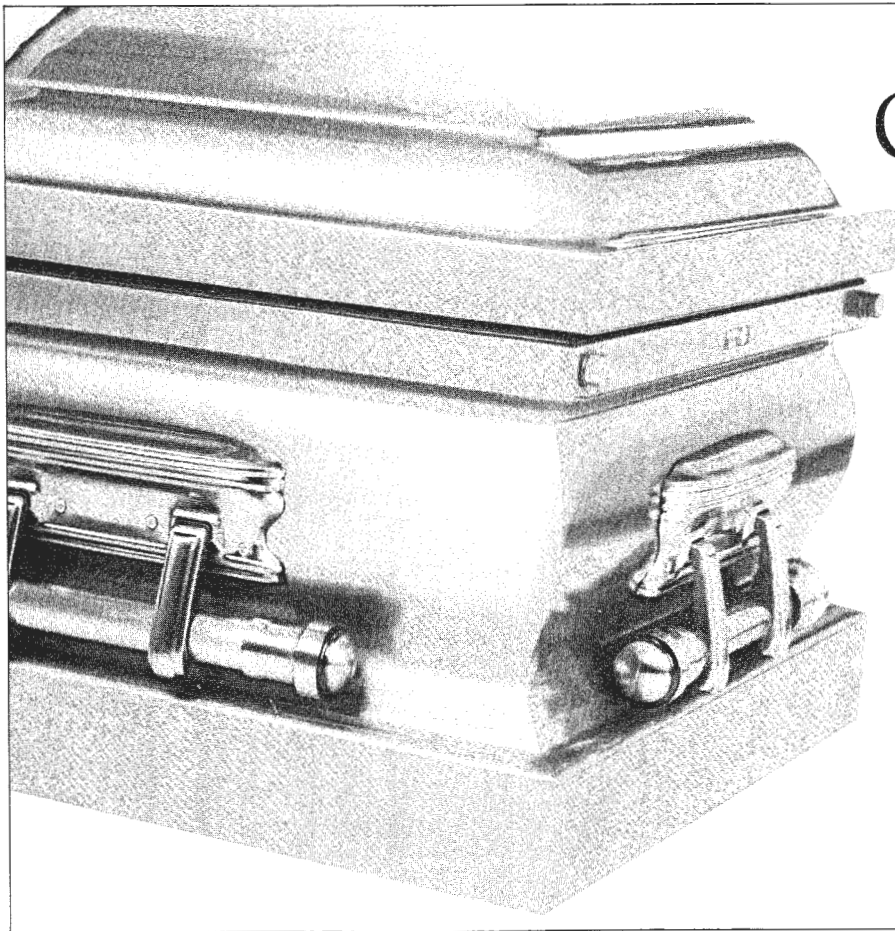
- 4) Major pastoral and public relations efforts around the questions of the worth of both the Catholic cemetery and the Catholic Funeral Rites. The involvement of those who support the Church's efforts in these matters would include not only funeral home directors, but also those who minister in parishes and labor in our cemeteries.
- 5) While these efforts are extremely worthwhile, they will not bear fruit unless the worth of the Catholic Cemetery and Funeral Traditions are told to those in the pew, those alienated and marginalized, those who staff parishes. Concerted efforts on the parts of all who can have an impact in this area will not only save the Church's Cemetery Tradition, but also enable it to be operated efficiently and at a lesser cost than the non-sectarian counterpart, especially the facilities owned and operated by cemetery and funeral home conglomerate organizations.
- 6) New models for funeral service . . . especially with funeral "homes" could evolve, especially where families have the opportunity to use church facilities to conduct wakes and hold vigils with the body of the deceased. With the expense associated with funeral service, should the parish consider owning rental caskets for those who wish to have the body present for the Eucharist and then cremated following the Church's liturgy? Regional

embalming centers, crematories operated by Catholic cemeteries at the cemetery itself are also possibilities worthy of consideration.

As one who has labored in the Church's cemeteries for the past thirty years, as one who loves both the Church and her cemeteries, as one who has found great strength, healing, support and potential in these holy grounds, I know this potential to be attainable. In my own consulting work with various dioceses throughout the United States and Canada, I have co-labored with Bishops, Finance and Cemetery Directors to bring this vision to reality.

Those who read this magazine, those who work in parishes, those who participate in various forms of ministry have a great opportunity to vision and create a future which includes significant roles for Catholic cemeteries and the Catholic Funeral Liturgy. Such visions for the future may include some form of involvement in funeral homes; it may not. Each diocese and Catholic cemetery program is different. All must work together, however, to utilize the gift of this ministry to building up the Kingdom. ■

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