

The Parish Cemetery — Light of Faith

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Introduction

In his talk before the 1979 Milwaukee Convention of the National Catholic Cemetery Conference, Most Reverend Rember G. Weakland, Archbishop of Milwaukee, issued at challenge as he said "Cemeteries should become places where one senses action, expectancy, desire, waiting — a whole new kind of sense of symbol which gives the idea of excitement, of rising again." Certainly for the parish cemetery director that concept has the significance of a seemingly, almost impossible task. It speaks to the reality of the parish cemetery being a *ministerial* and thus *dynamic* reality. It says that one must be free from the everyday headaches of procedures, operations, maintenance, development in order to have time to allow the mind to wander, to create, to envision the potential contained in that ministerial challenge. Archbishop Weakland says in that statement, to me, that there is great potential once we get organized, function efficiently and effectively in the immediate tasks before us so that we are free to be able to go beyond the immediate and respond to the challenge of Gospel-living which impels us to continue to broaden our horizons, understand human needs, and in a ministerial fashion, respond in a better and more complete way to those needs.

History

Taking those words to heart, I have continued to be more deeply convinced that the parish cemetery exists to minister to the needs of the parish community in a very special manner. The parish community known as Sacred Heart, Dearborn, in 1856 saw a need to establish Mount Kelly Cemetery. They felt that the cemetery was consonant with their concept of Church, of Catholic, of Parish. They set aside the land, established the cemetery, followed the canonical prescriptions for solemn blessing and began to sell grave spaces and inter the deceased from among their membership. Over the course of 116 years these practices continued, off and on, with little planning for the future, with no thought to space running out, with no real commitment to keep abreast with innovations in the cemetery field. There were, in the intervening years, a church to build, two schools to construct and staff, a convent to erect for the sisters teaching in these schools, a rectory necessary to house the growing staff of parish priests. And, at the same time, the Archdiocese was becoming involved in a larger scale approach to the burial of the dead with the introduction of the large diocesan cemetery. Growing availability and affordability of the motor car reduced geographic considerations and made the diocesan approach viable; so did a recognition that the parish cemetery was not keeping pace with developments in the cemetery field, not being maintained with the same standard of excellence as the diocesan cemetery. And, of course, it was certainly easier for the pastor to

direct families requesting Catholic burial to the diocesan cemetery. Perhaps, by so doing, creating no new interest in the parish cemetery, one might be relieved of its burden and only have to contend with the cutting of the grass there as well as in the other areas of the parish plant. There would be no need to become familiar with the complexity of what must be involved in the operation of a cemetery; who would have the time anyhow? And so it was that this model of operation existed for almost a fifty-year period. And with the great level of fluctuation through those fifty years, a certain amount of deterioration would take place. It would take place not only on the grounds of the cemetery, but in the records as well. As time would go on, the challenge would continue to grow, the headache would assume proportions of such magnitude as to seem insurmountable, and any attempt to create interest would be seen as a cautious disturbing of a sleeping giant, who, once awakened from a comfortable sleep, might wander in devastating and unpredictable directions. But, somewhere in God's Plan, a realization that such a condition would not be allowed to continue, was beginning to take shape. Times change; so do circumstances. In the late 1960's, parish life was such that a new pastor decided to look into the possibility of reactivation of Mount Kelly. He dared to disturb the sleeping giant! Of course, we all have to contend with the realities of life/death, growth/change. On the one hand, the cemetery once reactivation was begun, became once again a viable parish reality. On the other hand, the pastor who initiated the reactivation was reassigned. And so, once again, the choice came before us; can we put the giant back to sleep and contain the damage? Will those new lot-holders just go away quietly and will we somehow have to contain their impact, or will this reactivation take hold, responding to a real need, and will we somehow have to confront this new reality, get involved, discover just what the unforeseen challenges of reactivation would be. Inasmuch as this reopening of the cemetery responded to a genuine felt need for ministerial service from members of the parish, it would not go away and thus a new response had to be formulated.

A New Chapter

Problems somehow have an ability to catapult one right into the reality of the matter. Where does surplus soil from burial go? Who handles it? Who did the new survey and where are the maps? What is a fair price for opening/closing of a grave? What about new sections to open? What about rules and regulations? Who sets foundations? Who constructs foundations? What are foundations? Where are the books and who will keep them? How about the old sections? What about perpetual care? What is annual care? And once having new sections open in an old cemetery, those whose

families held space in old sections came forward and began to ask even more difficult questions for the neophyte like, "Can my wife be buried in my grandfather's plot?" So, what does one do in the face of such realities? There seemed to be two choices: RUN... or DIG IN AND LEARN! I'm happy to say that I didn't run, and forever will be grateful for the push of what must have been the Holy Spirit to get in there and learn the ropes. Such a learning process involved a variety of day-to-day steps like the formation of a Board of Directors with expertise in a variety of areas I felt would be necessary, a historical research committee to begin to piece together the missing records and maps, a searching out of experts in the field of cemetery management from the area and diocese to begin to assist in pricing and operations in the field, the joining of the National Catholic Cemetery Conference and obtaining standardized forms, directions, procedures, a real push to clean up the cemetery grounds and establish minimum (high) standards of maintenance, a recognition of the need for the introduction of pre-need selling, a program for the standardization of monuments/markers which responded to the needs of the families with members interred in Mount Kelly. But with all of this having been accomplished, there was still the opportunity for more. And so involvement began more deeply with the National Catholic Cemetery Conference, and the resources of the Conference began to be called upon more frequently and with a greater clarity. And, at the same time, new growth and new awareness surfaced because of a genuine recognition of love for this ministry. New potentials were now possible to explore. And Archbishop Weakland's challenge to make the Church's cemeteries resound with the restlessness of those who are excited as they wait for the Second Coming keeps coming to the fore. And the recognition that the taking up of this challenge is most difficult for those who have the experience of the parish cemetery that we have had at Mount Kelly. How can one begin to look at extra ministerial opportunities when one is confronted with the operations problems we faced? Who would want to dare to disturb those sleeping giants? Who is prepared to deal with the consequences of such actions?

A Response

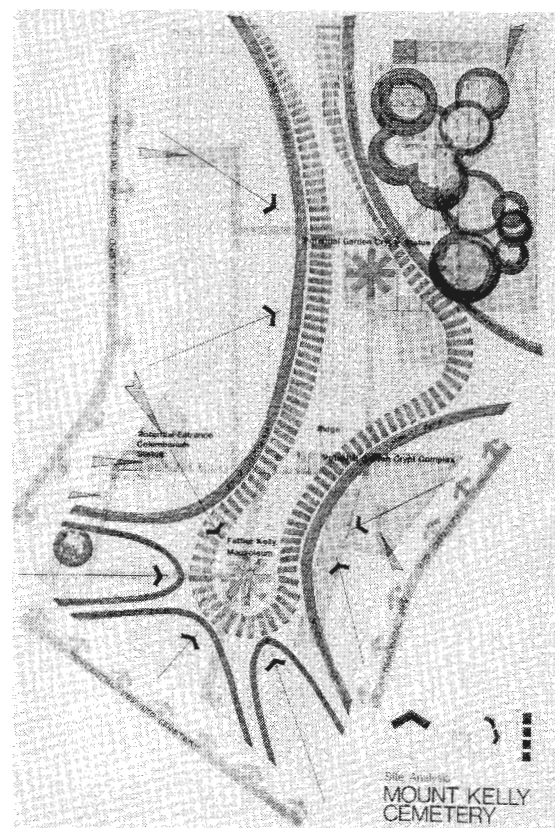
I am sure that we are all familiar with the television advertisement, "Oops! I could have had a V-8!" Reflecting on all of the above, one could have that sort of reaction to the next step in growth taken by the Board of Directors for Mount Kelly Cemetery. That step was the retention of the architectural/engineering firm of **Harley Ellington Pierce Yee Associates** to undertake a site analysis and develop a master plan for Mount Kelly. Deciding on such a course of action was of course personally risky for a cemetery director who invested himself totally in the reactivation and reclamation of the cemetery. What he had accomplished over eight years could have been rejected summarily by these professionals and a whole new beginning urged upon the Board of Directors. Perhaps this step should have been taken in 1968 when the reactivation of Mount Kelly was begun; perhaps it

could have been contracted in 1930 when the Cemetery was beginning to atrophy. But, not having taken the step at either of these points was certainly no excuse for not taking it now. Only last year, during the Conference, in conversations with Ralph Pierce and Guy Bohr of HEPY, did I learn of their existence in the 1930's! But my recent awareness of this firm and its Cemetery Division was in larger proportions than Mount Kelly. I was aware of their role in design of major mausoleums in the Detroit area. Would they even be interested in a project as small as Mount Kelly?

When the concepts of **site analysis** and **master plan** were explained to me during NCCC's 1980 Convention, I knew that I had found the answer for which I had been searching a long time. At once, my philosophical training came to the fore — telling me that this was the way to insure Mount Kelly's future growth and operation, bring together all of what we had attempted to accomplish in the past few years, and provide a blueprint for as yet new and untried approaches in so small an operation. It was simply a matter of returning and explaining these ideas to the Board of Directors. The Board's enthusiastic approval was forthcoming in the early months of 1981.

Site Analysis

Recognizing the value of goal/objectives style planning and operation, the **site analysis** was a logical first step to satisfy the goal of the Board of Directors that Mount Kelly Cemetery would continue to operate in an effective and efficient fashion as a ministerial arm of Sacred Heart Parish. **Harley Ellington Pierce Yee Associates (HEPY)** told us that "each cemetery, wheth-



er long-established or comparatively new, must direct its long range efforts toward providing facilities and services which optimize land-usage in an aesthetically appropriate manner." In the recommendation of the **site analysis**, we were instructed in the variety of steps that would be taken. The cemetery would be studied from the perspective of size, location, topography, neighborhood, wind and sun patterns, drainage, existing landscape, existing burials, room for expansion, optimum utilization of developed land, views from outside, views from inside, and a map detailing these factors would be provided as the basis for the **master plan**.

Master Plan

Taking the information gathered from the **site analysis**, cognizant of what other contemporary services and facilities are available and marketable in our area, a **master plan** would then be provided for Mount Kelly Cemetery which would make specific recommendations in a series of logical phases for the continued development of Mount Kelly. These steps would assure the fiscally sound future operation of the cemetery and were promoted from the understanding that "a cemetery serves large numbers of persons over a span of many years, and social, economic, religious and cultural changes can influence the planning process through every stage of the cemetery's development." In digesting this reality, the Board of Directors has had to come to grips with the rural character of Mount Kelly and a desire to preserve this status. This Board has also had to become conversant in concepts such as garden mausoleum, crypts, columbaria, double-depth burial. The challenge for implementation of such a **master plan** is not

only a financial one, but an aesthetic one. New products, new facilities, new approaches, new designs are sought which will not radically alter the rural (a touch of old Ireland) character of Mount Kelly. Implementation is the next challenge for the Mount Kelly Cemetery Board of Directors.

Restlessness

While the Board continues to struggle with the implementation of the **master plan**, ongoing ministerial functions continue as a recognition of and tribute to the reality that development of physical buildings and land is only one facet of what constitutes the operation of a parish cemetery. We continue to bury the dead, continue to keep proper records, continue to develop systems and procedures which facilitate easy maintenance of our grounds, seek to preserve and develop the religious character of Mount Kelly Cemetery, continue to encourage pre-need purchase of grave spaces, urge the consideration of placement of pre-need markers and monuments, continue to develop educational programs which help our parish members to grow to confront the sure reality of death in our lives and take the proper steps to plan for it, continue to minister to the bereaved.

In our restlessness to minister to the needs of our families, we are also growing in our awareness of identity as pastoral ministerial tool (catalyst) in Sacred Heart Parish's variety of other expressions. We feed into the process of "Evangelization" by identifying family situations where there has been a lapse of religious practice, coming to this awareness in pre- and at-need sales of grave spaces and arrangements for burials. We participate fully in the fostering of "Ecumenism" by the proper application of diocesan regulations concerning the burial of family of our Easement holders. We participate in "Sacramental Preparation" with our involvement in the Confirmation Service Project, involving volunteer work on the grounds of the parish cemetery and education concerning the surety of death/Resurrection in the future of these young people. We participate in the work of the Christian Service Commission further by providing our Death and Dying Seminars, our on-site Bereavement Counseling Program, our response to those not able to fully satisfy the fee structure at Mount Kelly. And we continue to work, to struggle, to experience the restlessness of the Pilgrim Church on the move to the full realization of the Kingdom of God.

Indeed, our parish cemetery is not a dinosaur from the past with a lost history, an outdated mode of response to today's need. It is a growing, struggling, changing, developing, forward-looking, viable, ministerial, functioning organization claiming its rightful place in the life of Sacred Heart Parish. Mount Kelly makes its own significant contribution to the Light of Faith struggling to shine in our particular geography. And, as such, certainly it has the potential of standing as a beacon for others in circumstances similar to its early history, issuing forth a call to say that reactivation, revitalization, new growth, pastoral ministry are not only possible but necessary to feed the Faith-Life of the Christian Catholic Community in our world.

