

# Life and Death Lessons From Pope John Paul II

by Joseph B. Sankovich

Those who have lived during more than one pontificate know that Catholic church events of March and April 2005 were historic! Who was not glued to the television or intrigued by periodicals, captivated by the “talking heads” and authors who provided background and offered perspective on the impact of the pontificate of John Paul II and identified needs of both the universal and “American” Catholic Church?

Out of those experiences, from the perspective of one who has worked in the ministry of Catholic cemeteries for more than 35 years, I’ve been doing some reflecting. To organize and integrate my thoughts, I’ve come to a common denominator: **FEAR**.

In offering some thoughts on this topic, I hope some useful concepts will evolve that will be helpful to those who deeply love this Catholic cemetery ministry. Perhaps we can improve what we do to preserve and advance the impact of Catholic cemeteries. I have collected, along with my own, the thoughts and writings of others from 1979 forward and organized them in the following fashion:

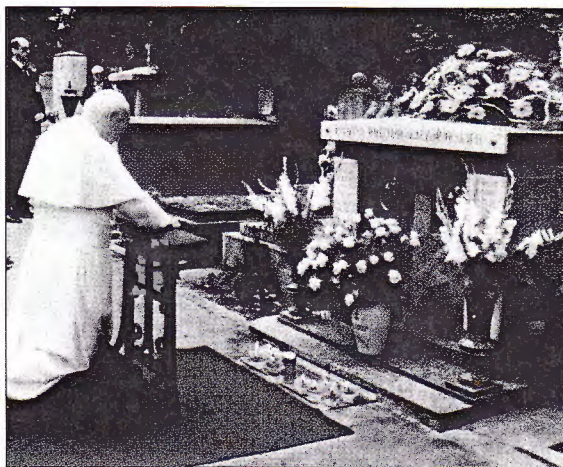
- The pontificate of John Paul II, beginning with “**Be not afraid...**”
- The public suffering and death of John Paul II
- Catholic beliefs about death and eternal life
- How Catholics and their families express these beliefs
- Growth opportunities for Catholic cemetery ministries
- The Pontificate of John Paul II

## Be Not Afraid!

Twenty-six years ago, John Paul II stepped onto the balcony of St. Peter’s Basilica, and the first words of his pontificate were, “**Be not afraid!**” Of what? The election of a non-Italian pope? The direction in which he would

lead the Church? The future of the world?

His words of encouragement are a common biblical theme. In the Hebrew Scriptures, Yahweh communicates these same words to Abram [Genesis 15]; we find them said to Daniel in chapter 10.



Pope John Paul II praying at his parent’s grave.

This phrase appears in Joshua 1 and also in Isaiah 42, coupled with vocations to leadership, with the promise that God would support the one called.

In Christian Scriptures, we find the same words with the announcement of the birth of John the Baptist to Zechariah, to Mary at the Annunciation, to Joseph so that he would take Mary as his wife and

to the shepherds at the birth of Jesus. This is only a small sample of the challenge—“not to be afraid”—appearing in the Scriptures.

Most telling, however, is what followed from “Be Not Afraid,” especially in the announcement of Jesus’ birth to the shepherds in the fields: “I bring you news of great joy!” We have the same opportunity to find joy in the ways in which we exercise our Catholic cemetery ministry.

## Courage

For most, there was no direct contact with Pope John Paul II. Yet, he made more than 100 trips outside Rome, and millions of people participated in papal Masses or audiences. There were encyclicals, challenges, exhortations and even an attempted assassination, but never fear! In fact, exactly the opposite. The most common human characteristic displayed by John Paul II was **COURAGE**. And this was the same challenge he offered each of us, especially the young: Find courage, create courage and generate courage!

Within the context of the Catholic cemetery ministry, where do we need to find courage? Those in leadership positions need courage. Standing before diocesan leadership with conviction about this ministry and requesting the required tools to perform takes courage.

Those who meet with grieving families need courage, whether making cemetery arrangements for the burial of a child, parent, senior citizen, middle-aged person in the prime of life or a young person with so much potential.

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Those who meet with families to address decoration or memorialization rule infractions need courage; so do those scheduling appointments and meeting families in pre-need environments.

### Public Suffering and Death of John Paul II

If this need not to be afraid is so important, and courage is the opposite of fear, then where is the well into which we can dip to find that sometimes evasive courage?

The life habits of John Paul II provide insight. The last years and moments of his life provide answers. While many only saw the very public persona of John Paul, there was another side that those who worked closely with him knew. He spent six to seven hours a day in private prayer. In his earlier years, he was accustomed to prostrating himself on the chapel floor. His example shows that courage comes from close communication with God.

Ordinary Catholics who are called to leadership positions in Catholic cemeteries know how to pray, don't we? Maybe we don't pray six hours each day, but we have opportunities when driving to work and commuting home to pray for ourselves, our families, friends, staffs, those who have received services from our cemeteries during that particular day and those whom we have laid to rest in our Catholic cemeteries.

The Eucharist was also central to John Paul's life. His relationship with Jesus was rooted in the celebration of the Eucharist, under the dynamics of reconciliation, remembrance and thanksgiving. Is the Eucharist central to our own personal lives? Can we do what we do without the support of the Lord and the community of believers who come together to remember and give thanks?

Yet there is another element, **vicarious suffering**, i.e., suffering not because one's conduct seems to merit it [Hebrew Scriptures], but suffering that is redemptive, has benefit to the person who suffers and perhaps to others. Those educated in Catholic schools many years ago can recall the sisters telling us to "*offer it up for the poor souls!*" If there is any Catholic concept conspicuously

absent in today's American venue, it is vicarious suffering--**offering it up!** What can we point to as the alternatives? Is it right-to-die legislation, pain-free death with abundant medication, growth in suicide or putting older people in nursing homes to avoid having to be confronted with age and debilitation, i.e., **SUFFERING?**

Yet John Paul II did not choose to retire, to be put away, to hide his Parkinson's Disease and its debilitating effects. The Holy Father made public appearances, manifesting the consequences of age and illness. If we have any sense of his theology, we know he was "*offering it up.*"

### Catholic Beliefs About Death and Eternal Life

*Certain Questions Concerning Eschatology* is a letter from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, issued in May 1979. Cardinal Seper was Prefect of the Congregation at the time, and this letter was used to summarize Catholic beliefs about death and life after death with the following nine points:

1. The Church believes in the Resurrection of the dead.
2. The Church understands Resurrection as referring to the whole person.
3. The Church affirms that a spiritual element survives and subsists after death, endowed with consciousness and will, i.e., the human self subsists.
4. **Prayers, Funeral Rites and religious acts offered for the dead have meaning/worth.**
5. There is individual judgement.
6. There is general judgement.
7. Happiness for the just; eternal punishment for the unrepentant sinner.
8. Opportunity for purification between death and beatific vision, i.e. purgatory.
9. Mary's assumption prefigures the bodily glorification that is the destiny of the elect.

Each point demands study and explanation and is an appropriate topic for employee training, especially as Catholic cemeteries grow in the employment of those

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## Plenary Indulgence May be Gained in the Year of the Eucharist

Announced by Pope John Paul II, two plenary indulgences may be gained during 2005, the Year of the Eucharist, by participating attentively and piously in a sacred function in honor of the Blessed Sacrament, whether exposed or in the tabernacle. Clergy, religious and others may gain the indulgence by reciting the Evening

and Night Prayer from the Liturgy of the Hours before the Blessed Sacrament.

The usual conditions for plenary indulgences apply: reception of the sacraments of penance and the Eucharist, freedom from attachment to sin and prayer for the intentions of the pope.

The sick and others who cannot get to church may make the visit to the Blessed Sacrament in their hearts and recite the Our Father and the Creed, with an invocation to Jesus in the Eucharist (Decree of the Apostolic Penitentiary, December 25, 2004).

who are not members of the Catholic Church or perhaps have been inadequately schooled in the Church's teachings in such matters.

The first point I would like to explore is where courage might be operative and where fear might be holding an upper hand. Items 1, 2, 3, 8 and 9 seem to be filled with courage and hope. Life is not the end. After death, we will be able to reunite with our loved ones and live in happiness forever.

A second point: Items 5, 6, and 7 focus on judgement, justice, punishment and reward. Catholic theology has shifted from "fear and guilt" to "courage and happiness" over the past quarter century. This focus comes from Vatican II and those trained in a newer theology. The challenge we face is balance.

An excellent meditation exercise might be to determine where we find ourselves on a sliding scale between courage/hope and fear/judgement. Those in leadership positions will have to determine how they communicate what the Church teaches and where they, individually, find themselves on their journey to eternal life.

### How Catholics and Their Families Currently Express These Beliefs

Where we find ourselves in relation to these nine items impacts how we understand Catholic cemeteries as ministry, where we position ourselves within that ministry and what we define as our role and responsibilities within Catholic cemeteries and the Greater Church in building the Kingdom of the Lord. It also impacts how we present Catholic cemeteries to those who make use of or simply visit these facilities.

My third point clarifies these considerations and amplifies the fourth item on the list of what Catholics believe: "Prayers, Funeral Rites and religious acts offered

for the dead have meaning/worth."

News reports tell us that more than two million people passed by the remains of Pope John Paul II. I watched the rituals surrounding his lying in state in the area of the papal apartment, his transfer to the sanctuary of St. Peter's and the celebration of the Funeral Mass. Inasmuch as I have been in these rooms/areas before, I was captivated and wondered what those who were fortunate enough to be there during the funeral were thinking and feeling.

My focus was on the difference between "paying one's respects" and "praying for the dead." Those of us with pre-Vatican II training know there is a difference which is identified in the list of those items Catholics believe. We believe in the worth of prayer for the dead. We could amplify that thought: belief that prayer for the dead helps both the deceased and those who mourn the particular loss.

So, focusing on the positive, and not being judgmental of anyone in attendance and the various religious traditions from which they came, do we recognize our own unique Catholic practice of prayer for our beloved dead? How does that play out in our work, our training and support of staff and communication to pastors, from which our services come, with families who come to visit graves and have complaints or make requests?

Several years ago, while working as acting director of cemeteries in the Diocese of Springfield, MA, I solicited patron feedback through a volunteer-participation survey and received over 800 responses. We were evaluating decoration regulations and wanted to receive input from those who make use of the facilities.

Among the important information we gleaned by tabulating responses, was the following ranking of reasons

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Daniel Manus Pinkwater (b.1941)



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why people were visiting the diocesan cemeteries:

- To decorate graves
- To reconnect, i.e., talk to the deceased
- To check on the maintenance of the grave site
- To assure there was no stone damage since the last visit
- To commune with nature

What can we glean from this? **Prayers, Funeral Rites and religious acts offered for the dead have meaning /worth.** Among the realities that surface: We are losing our tradition of prayer for the dead.

We already know that there is a continuing decline in the full celebration of the *Order of Christian Funerals*. Those with Catholic cemetery responsibilities have yet to make a meaningful contribution to promotion of religious acts offered for the dead. ■



*The companion piece to this article, "The Intrinsic Value of the Catholic Cemetery," provides suggestions on how to enhance the importance of our cemeteries to the Christian laity and starts on page 13.*



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