

# Seattle Catholic Cemeteries Issues

## Mission Statement

Archbishop Raymond G. Hunthausen, Archdiocese of Seattle, Washington, announced on May 1, 1988 the promulgation of a Mission Statement for Associated Catholic Cemeteries of the Archdiocese.

Believed to be unique in this country, the Mission Statement places the functions of the Catholic cemetery into both historical perspective and the theological context of Catholic belief about death and burial. The statement is the result of a two-year collaborative process involving theologians, liturgists and cemetery personnel as well as Archbishop Hunthausen and Archbishop Thomas Murphy.

Confusion about the role of Catholic cemeteries in the post-Vatican II Church prompted the statement, according to Joseph Sankovich, Director of the Associated Catholic Cemeteries. "As one way of implementing the spirit of the Second Vatican Council, many bishops relaxed the mandate requiring Catholics to be buried in Catholic cemeteries," Sankovich said. "That wasn't meant to say, 'It's not important how you deal with death and burial or that Catholic cemeteries no longer have a value or place in our Tradition' but rather 'We want you to reflect on these issues as they relate to you and your loved ones.' But we didn't give people tools for that reflection."

The Mission Statement is intended, in part, to be just such a tool, calling Catholic cemeteries to pursue actively the roles as teacher of Catholic belief and traditions about death and burial within the context of the mission of the church to reflect and to build the Kingdom. One area of Catholic cemetery ministry peculiarly suited to this role, said Sankovich, is the Pre-need Program.

Pre-need programs—the practice of contacting families with the intention of arranging burial services in advance of immediate need—were developed by secular cemeteries in the western United States in the 1930's. The relaxation of the mandate for burial in Catholic cemeteries gave an added boost to these programs because they could more easily approach Catholic families. "In a way, Catholic cemeteries go into pre-need programs out of self-defense," admits Sankovich, "but as we confronted the need to place these programs in the larger context of the mission of the Catholic cemetery, we realized that they are best conducted as an evangelization program." When Catholic pre-need counselors contact families about arrangements for burial space, he said, "They raise el-

emental questions of belief and tradition. Do I believe in the Resurrection? Do I want to make that belief evident by joining in death my Catholic community in a sacred space which does not try to hide death but which proclaims that it is one step on the journey to Eternal Life? Do I see the sacramental nature, the sign value of the Catholic cemetery witnessing Resurrection faith?"

In addition to teaching and evangelizing, the Mission Statement calls Catholic cemeteries to continue their ministry of comfort (paraclesis), helping people "face the hard reality of death in a context of faith" in the Resurrection. The Statement also outlines the need to offer non-discriminating burial services for the poor and disenfranchised, to make use of the full range of our Catholic burial ritual, to preserve the diversity of ethnic burial traditions, and to encourage alienated Catholics to return to our faith community.

"We serve as one point of contact for alienated Catholics," said Sankovich, "and we can play a role in reconnecting them with parish life. Strengthening ties with pastors and parishes served by Associated Catholic Cemeteries is a major focus of energy," he noted, and he hopes that the Mission Statement will be an aid to that effort.

"Archbishop Hunthausen stated it best in his letter of promulgation," Sankovich added, "when he said that we hope 'our priests, deacons and other pastoral ministers will find the document helpful in exploring ways in which parishes and cemeteries can collaborate to better serve families around the issue of death and burial.'"

Copies of the full text of the Mission Statement and the Archbishop's letter are available in brochure form by writing Associated Catholic Cemeteries, c/o Archdiocese of Seattle, 910 Marion Street, Seattle, WA 98104. ■

### Do We Still Need Catholic Cemeteries?

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Name \_\_\_\_\_

Cemetery Name \_\_\_\_\_

City \_\_\_\_\_

State \_\_\_\_\_ Zip \_\_\_\_\_