

THE EUCHARIST & CATHOLIC CEMETERIES

United in Memory and Thanksgiving

by Joe Sankovich, CCE, CCCE

*On October 7, 2004 Pope John Paul II, in an Apostolic Letter titled *Mane Nobiscum Domine*, announced "The Year of the Eucharist."*

The full text of the document is available at www.vatican.va and is extremely useful for those with Catholic cemetery administrative responsibilities. Inasmuch as the Apostolic Letter is rooted in the Encyclical Letter *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, offered by Pope John Paul II on April 17, 2003, study of this more lengthy document is helpful; this document is available at the same site.

Why surface this topic and these two documents for Catholic cemetery administrators, many of whom are not schooled in theology and may have difficulty understanding the nuances of the two documents? For purposes of initiating discussion, I offer three concerns:

- 1] Contemporary questioning of the rationale for the Church's involvement in cemetery ministry;
- 2] The decline in the full use of the **Order of Christian Funerals**, i.e. Vigil, Funeral Mass with the body present, and Committal Service (preferably in a Catholic cemetery);
- 3] A perception - or perhaps a complaint - that administrators of Catholic cemetery ministries are not connected with the life of either the diocese or the parishes.

By offering these thoughts my hope is to be of assistance to those who are faced with these questions and offer some beginning thoughts on how to engage in



a collaborative dialog with diocesan administrators and parish leadership. Such conversations, perhaps workshops and study groups, can lead to a greater appreciation of the immense potential of our Catholic cemetery ministry to build up the Kingdom of the Lord until He comes again in glory. I believe this can be accomplished by understanding the intimate connection between Eucharist and the Catholic cemetery.

Catholic Eucharistic theology is rich with history, meaning, application, and opportunities for on-going exploration, the intention of this undertaking. We understand Eucharist as sacrament, as sacrifice, as meal, as paschal mystery, as communion - a sign or cause of unity, as Real Presence, as transubstantiation. Theological literature, before the Second Vatican Council and since, is rich with reflections on these and many other aspects of the Eucharistic paradigm.

With an understanding of the Greek root meaning of Eucharist as thanksgiving, let's begin with the **first issue** surfaced above, the **church's involvement in cemetery ministry**. Two earlier experiences color my reflection on this issue. In the mid-1980's I remember being challenged by Seattle Archbishop Raymond Hunthausen to justify the Church's owning and operating Catholic cemeteries; he offered the possibility that they might be ecumenically divisive. Not one to offer a challenge without providing help to explore the question, the Archbishop formed a

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task force from which came the first mission statement for Catholic cemeteries in North America, identifying *paraclesis*, catechesis and evangelization as the underpinning rationale for continued involvement in this ministerial service.

Paraclesis, understood as the ministry of comfort, clarifies one of the most important aspects of this ministry, supporting the grieving through their journey to healing. The cemetery and the grave of the deceased are important focal points in the grieving process which may include transition through denial, anger, bargaining and depression. In articulating the goal of acceptance, we root our Catholic cemetery purpose in resurrection faith, knowing that Jesus Christ rose from the dead, has gone ahead to prepare a place for us in eternal life, and that we will be reunited with our beloved dead once again. Catechesis, as applied to this mission, challenges those with Catholic cemetery responsibility, to more fully amplify this resurrection faith to those who are members of our faith community; evangelization extends the same challenge to those who are either not part of our faith or who have wandered away from it.

The mission statement is dynamic and continues to offer new challenges and opportunities. It is as different as people are, as circumstances surrounding a death might be, as families who bring a loved one to us to be entrusted to our care.

In May 2002, Father John Gallagher, Director of Cemeteries for the Diocese of Wheeling-Charleston



The cemetery and the grave of the deceased are important focal points in the grieving process.

engaged our firm to offer a workshop on Catholic cemetery ministry to pastors of parishes with cemetery responsibility, including paid staff and lay volunteers. The workshops culminated a series of engagements that involved evaluation of the diocesan cemetery and over 60 parish cemeteries, the formulation of policies and procedures, and the development and promulgation of standard rules and regulations for all Catholic cemeteries within the diocese, the entire state of West Virginia.

During the workshops, presented over the course of a week at four different sites, the same question of the Church's involvement in this ministry surfaced and I had the opportunity to begin to flesh out my thoughts on the intimate connection between the Eucharist as thanksgiving and the Catholic cemetery.

The structure within which the Catholic community gathers to celebrate the Eucharist consists of two major parts, i.e. the Liturgy of the Word and the Liturgy of the Eucharistic Sacrifice/Meal, i.e. memory and thanksgiving. We are also called through the Rite of Reconciliation to be properly disposed for what we will hear and what we will celebrate. So, now we have three elements, forgiveness, memory and thanksgiving.

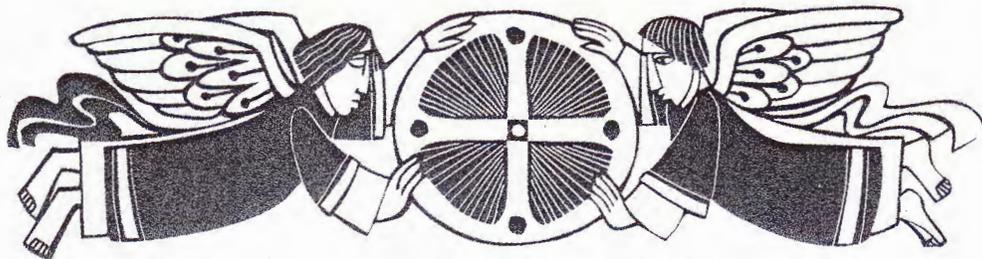
What happens in church at Eucharist is the same dynamic that is taking place in our cemeteries when those who survive the death of a loved one come to remember that person, give thanks to that person for his/her involvement in the survivor's life, and perhaps either forgive or ask to be forgiven for wrongs committed. From my perspective, this is why Catholics have such a strong tradition of visiting our cemeteries and praying for our beloved dead. Perhaps most are not able to articulate this dynamic, but this is where we are able to be of help to them, to those who pastor them, and to strengthening the rationale for Catholic cemeteries by demonstrating the intimate connection between the celebration of the Eucharist and the Catholic cemetery.

A number of priests came to me after these reflections to express wonder and gratitude, wonder as to why they had not made the connection, and gratitude that they now had a wealth of material on which to reflect and make part of their funeral liturgy planning and celebration; they also felt much more comfortable in supporting the ministry of Catholic cemeteries, whether in their own parishes or the diocesan facility.

Out of these brief reflections we are able to easily move to both of the documents cited at the beginning of this article and see how intimately Eucharist and cemetery are connected. Can we not hear the plea of the wid-

owed spouse or parent of a deceased child, wishing that the person for whom they mourn would have been able to stay with them? Can we not see the possibility of connecting the pain and suffering prior to a death with the ongoing struggle to walk the journey of bereavement? What might be the possibilities of Eucharist as support in these life experiences and how can we support those who are called to daily minister to these families?

The second issue that I surfaced previously is the decline in the full use of the **Order of Christian Funerals**. By the time of Catholic cemetery involvement, decisions about what sort of funeral service will take place have already been made; pastors often tell me that the decision is made in the funeral home without either their input or involvement. What can the Catholic cemetery administrator do in these



instances? There are three possibilities to facilitate discussion among cemetery, parish and diocesan leaders.

FIRST is the clear possibility of integrating promotion of the full Order of Christian Funerals in all pre-need efforts that are undertaken under the auspices of any Catholic cemetery program. This would include incorporation into presentation kits and other printed materials.

SECOND is a closer working relationship with funeral home personnel and the involvement of theologians and liturgists in working

with them to more fully understand the wisdom of using the full Order of Christian Funerals and facilitating the connection between parish and bereaved family for decisions on this issue.

THIRD is assuring that the Committal Service as delineated in the OCF can be celebrated as intended in Catholic cemeteries. If the Catholic cemetery is not the place where the Liturgical Funeral Rites are celebrated in the best possible way, how do we justify their existence?

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There are a host of challenges facing Catholic cemetery administrators these days. Among them are cultural shifts that call for simple funeral/burial practices such as cremation, scattering of cremated remains, moving through the death experience with speed and efficiency, devoting funds used for funeral purposes to other - perhaps more noble - causes. Some challenges we share with pastors and funeral directors.

A second group of challenges might include alienation and marginalization from the Catholic church, especially notable in the younger generations of those who are surviving the deceased; a lack of understanding of the nature and function of sacraments and religious rituals, especially the Eucharist and the Order of Christian Funerals. How are these challenges rooted in the contemporary loss of a sense of belonging, especially to our Catholic church and its parishes? Easy examples abound and include the drift of traditional Hispanic Catholics to smaller storefront churches where they feel welcomed and needed, closing of parishes without a perceived trying to do everything possible to save these communities and their parish identity.

If we cannot develop a real sense of belonging, it is difficult to communicate the need for the parish community to be a legitimate place from which members are entrusted to the Lord through the various aspects of the Order of Christian Funerals. From a cemeterian's perspective, one need only look at the military to understand depth of community experience and commitment.



*We must continually be asking
"What would Jesus do?"*

Is there ever difficulty in assuring the observance of the various military protocols associated with the death of a veteran or one who has died in combat? The contemporary challenge for both those in parish and Catholic cemetery is to create that sense of belonging, and Eucharist is not only the celebration, but the tool we are given to meet the challenge. Here, those in Catholic cemetery ministry, especially those with diocesan cemetery roles - where there is no strong single parish connection - have an opportunity to be catalysts in generating creative responses. The first question to ask is the ways the Catholic cemetery fosters a sense of belonging ... and to what communities?

The third issue that I surfaced at the beginning of this article is the perception of a disconnect between the parish/diocese and the Catholic cemetery ministry. Today the Catholic church is in the public eye for substantive issues involving the negative aspects of celibacy, priesthood, sexual abuse, bankruptcy, episcopal leadership. Diocesan and parish financial strains are being experienced as a result of so much negativity. These constraints are already being felt in the ministry of Catholic cemeteries with requests for increased diocesan support meaning more efficiency and trimming of expenditure budgets, perhaps declines in pre-need sales, attitudes of those who have issues with the Church and their experiences of grief and loss.

There are plenty of opportunities for reconciliation here! There are also opportunities for memory and thanksgiving!! As a Eucharistic community, we are made up of imperfect human beings; neither baptism nor ordination to priesthood/episcopacy confers perfection. As difficult as it is, in the same way that we must forgive or be forgiven by our beloved dead, we must do the same with our church, its other members and leaders. Confronted by the issues of the day, nourished by the Eucharist, we as a community of believers must continually be asking, "What would Jesus do?" when confronted with the challenges we face as a community. Perhaps with a greater understanding of these dynamics, Catholic cemetery personnel can be people who help to generate these things, especially belonging and forgiveness. We can make the connections between the living and the dead, between the heaven toward which we strive and earth where we must build community to help build the Kingdom of the Lord.

So, what are the possibilities of collaboration? There are several which come to the top of my list. First, it's important that those in diocesan leadership roles have an in-depth understanding of the mission and ministry of Catholic cemeteries to assure that this ministry remains viable and able to support the other ministries of the

Church. Catholic cemetery administrators must take a lead role in assuring this understanding.

Another is identification of all the various ministries represented in a diocese and facilitating a questioning of what collaborative roles Catholic cemeterians might have. For example, Catholic schools are replete with opportunities to teach the connection between Catholic cemeteries and Eucharist/parishes; so are diocesan religious education offices, including RCIA. The Liturgy or Worship Department is another obvious opportunity.

How about the Presbyteral and Diocesan Pastoral Councils, the Planning and Development Office, the Human Resources Department, the ministry of deacons, vocations and seminarians? Some possibilities within these areas include development of curricula to include death and bereavement in Catholic worship and cemeteries, prayer and sacramental celebrations that include

Catholic cemeteries, integration of Catholic cemeteries into seminary studies, offering stipends and opportunities for theological reflection on various aspects of Catholic cemeteries for seminary and graduate theology students. How about parish-based offerings that are not just targeted at generating sales in diocesan cemetery building programs?

When reading the two documents identified at the beginning of this article I took several pages of notes where I could easily make the connection between what was being said about the Eucharist and the ministry of Catholic cemeteries.

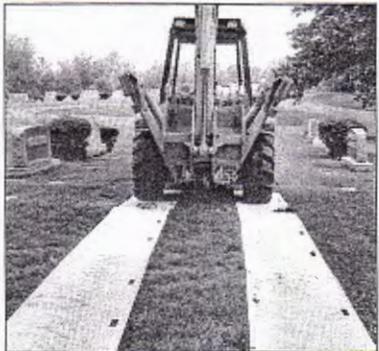
I thought about focusing this article on those notes, but decided against that approach; I believe an important first step is for those involved in Catholic cemetery leadership positions to study the two documents and facilitate ways for those locally involved in this ministry, both on their own staff and within the larger diocesan/parish

cemetery community, to also study the documents. Following that study, dialog among themselves would be extremely useful; then collaboration with a wider Catholic cemetery audience is appropriate for opportunities to become more deeply engaged in this, the **Year of the Eucharist**, in ways that support/build both the Catholic cemetery ministry and the Church.

My hope, in offering this article, is to facilitate local examination of the contemporary identity, roles and responsibilities for Catholic cemeteries, and out of that exam, to cause others to publish their thoughts and experiences around the issues and approaches surfaced herein. ■

Joseph B. Sankovich holds a Master of Arts in New Testament Theology from the University of Detroit. His consulting practice, located in Tucson, AZ, is devoted to Catholic cemetery administration.

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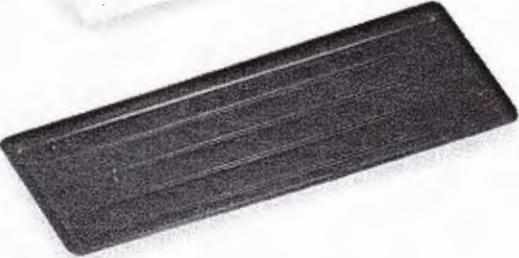
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