

# THE CATHOLIC CEMETERIAN . . . Grief Counsellor? Grief Minister? Other?



by Joseph P. Sankovich  
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In the past year, in several different situations and geographies, I have been touched by the following tragedies: last December a two-year-old was run over by a car while playing in front of his home; in January, a very popular and active high school senior was killed instantly in a car accident involving a drunk driver; in March, again in a car accident, the death of an only daughter just ready to graduate from college; in June, the murder (as yet unsolved) of a twenty-two year old young man. To that list, without consulting records, I can recall the death of a young mother, survived by both children and parents. One need not rely on the experiences of another Catholic cemeterian to be exposed to tragic deaths. Families with these experiences come through our doors every day. Death is tragic; sudden death even more so; the death of a child in our times and culture is perhaps the most tragic, most intense of losses and we are called upon to respond in some fashion.

We have alternatives. We can assist in locating a grave space or crypt. We can complete the paperwork involved. We can be distant and reserved, composed and matter-of-fact as we perform these tasks and no one would fault us in doing our job. Somehow, in this world of complex and unsolvable problems, there are those who say that we should do more than that. Hence, the title of the article. And the question that surfaces is what more we might do in these situations and of what benefit would it be to do more than our routine work.

Ours continues to evolve as a very complex world. For those who are

involved with the bereaved, there is a very fine distinction which must be observed as we venture to respond to individuals and families coming to us. In the area of bereavement, we find psychiatrists, psychologists, social workers, priests, religious women, religious brothers, permanent deacons, transitional deacons, lay and religious pastoral ministers, funeral directors, grief counsellors on funeral home staffs, cemetery sales counsellors, cemetery directors and in-house staffs, all to a greater or lesser degree, all prompted by personal and professional motives, seeking to be of some service to those who have experienced a loss because of death. Our list of those involved is not meant to be all inclusive. Our surfacing of motivation is not judgmental, simply raised here because we as Catholic cemeterians are in the midst of all of these other individuals and need to continue to identify our expertise and make that expertise available in the best possible fashion to those who have need of our services.

Catholic cemeterians are touched by grief. It is part and parcel of what we do. Our situations and circumstances, however, are quite different and so how we are able to respond will vary from situation to situation. For example, ours might be a very small parish cemetery and we may be the pastor of the parish responsible for this cemetery. We may under those circumstances have more time available to know individual and families better and thus be able to identify where there are situations within which we can ministerially respond. Perhaps, however, we are a cemetery

facility with altogether different circumstances, i.e. much larger, constricted by union regulations, small staffs, large demands on time and facilities, a lay man or woman. How we are able to respond to a grief situation will be much different.

It has been my experience with Catholic cemeterians that a desire to respond to the best of our abilities and competences exists without question. Those who are involved in the Catholic Cemetery Apostolate continue to affirm this reality. What seems to be the challenge to us today is to sort out the variety of possible suggestions that are being put before us from those who work in the field of grief therapy, seeking to understand them to the best of our abilities, and then investigate whether and how some, many, any, all, part might be integrated into the ministry we perform on behalf of the Mystical Body of Christ, the Church.

When we look at how we are being challenged to work in this field, to CHANGE for the good of the families we serve, and wonder how on earth we will ever be able to change certain of our practices, all we need to do is look at others in circumstances similar to our own and quickly we should be able to understand that our panic and frustration is not in isolation. For example, today homes for senior citizens are challenged by the suggestion that they begin to include infants and youngsters below school age in some sort of daycare facility attached to an old age home. This is offered for a variety of reasons, among which is the need for older people to continue to feel useful and infants to know a generation beyond their parents (old

people) and see a value to growing old. This may be necessitated by the experience of a new generation of grandparents distanced from grandchildren by retirement homes in more tropical climates. Imagine the challenge to those working in this type of situation!

By surfacing the problems, the benefits, the opportunities, does it mean that every old age home will move to have a nursery or pre-school attached to it? I would hardly think so; there are many other factors to be considered.

At the same time, consider the doctor and hospital facility. In the realm of grief/bereavement, they are being told that it is better for terminal patients to die at home. What are the implications for CHANGE involved in such a suggestion. Who will be primary caregivers? What equipment will be necessary? How about hospital personnel and staffing situations. Who will cover overhead? All of these are problems associated with one suggestion. And these are not even viewed from the perspective of the family . . . from their reality, can this suggestion be implemented? At what cost? With what value? It is truly a dilemma.

We would certainly be remiss if we did not consider the funeral director.

Would it be any more difficult to tell him that there is tremendous benefit to the family at the time of the death of a child to allow that child to remain with the parents until they are ready to surrender him/her to the care of the funeral director? How must he change his routine to accommodate the suggestion that parents have an opportunity to wash and clothe, to rock and say personal goodbyes with the youngster following the death and prior to his taking charge? What is he to do when the family announces that they are building their own casket? How should he respond when the family insists on no cosmetics, no lifelike appearance? What is his response to the closed casket request? What might he do when the father insists on carrying the infant out to the car which will be used to take the body to the funeral home? Some of these are situations already encountered by funeral directors. Others are suggestions made by Dr. Elisabeth Kubler-Ross in her newest book, *On Children and Death* (New York: Macmillan, 1983). The funeral director, of course, at the very minimum must be prepared for these requests, must know the traditions and benefits of his services, so that he is able to integrate that knowledge with the situation of the family making such

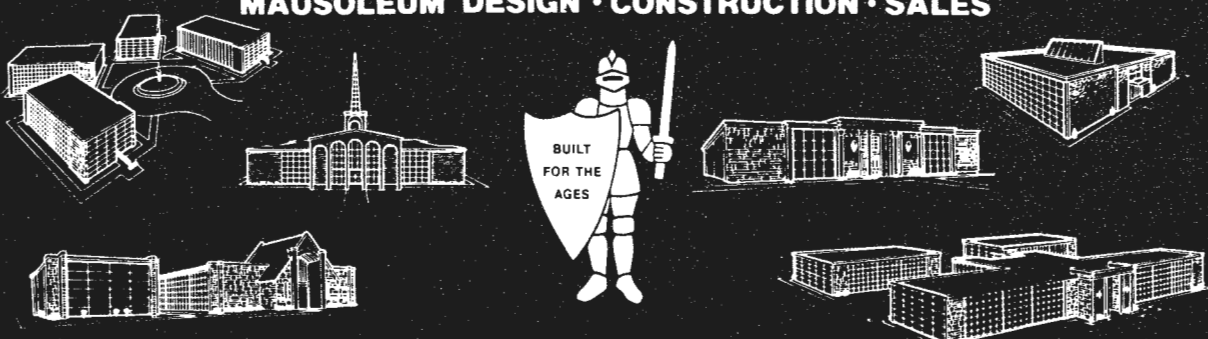
a request, and respond in such a way that is of most benefit to the family.

Out of the context of the grief/bereavement awareness phenomenon, what types of requests have we heard? Certainly we have been called to identify ourselves in a ministerial capacity, to see what we do in that context. A personal identification more in line with ministry would be one result. How we respond to that will be based on how we understand ourselves, how we see Catholic cemeteries satisfying a significant need in the Church, how we relate to the term "ministry."

Another request that I have personally heard is for permission to be granted for family members to remain while the casket is lowered into the vault. Another would certainly be for committal services to be conducted graveside; another that I have not heard yet from families, but have heard allusion to by Kubler-Ross, might be the removal of the artificial grass surrounding the grave itself. Other requests involve cremation and the disposition of cremated remains. Of course, many involve particular requests for memorialization and/or grave adornment.

When we are in the situation of high emotion surfaced by bereavement,

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when we are in a highly public capacity representing the Catholic Church as it seeks to minister to the bereaved, when we are captivated by regulations which have been in effect for so many years (for example, memorialization regulations in a particular section of a cemetery like flush only single stones) that a change thirty years later would wreak havoc, when we are being confronted at all sides by evolving technology in a changing society and dynamic Church, then we are in a position most delicate and in need of careful, thoroughly discussed, measured response.

In light of all of the above, how can we respond when we hear suggestions coming from a variety of sources offering possible changes in established procedures or suggesting new avenues of approach in our work?

Might there be a need for us to establish a grief/bereavement library in our offices if one does not exist? Would it be helpful if we were to provide copies of books to parents who have lost a child in death? Would there be some benefit in making available to our counsellors/staffs workshops in the dynamics of grief resolution? Would there be some benefit to round table discussions on how responses have been made to families in particular circumstances such as those experiencing the death of a child? Would there be some benefit in different style arrangement conferences and offices? Is there some way that graveside services can be made available where desired at no additional charge where cemeteries use interment chapels as the regular method? Can we allow families to be present for the lowering of a casket? Can we eliminate artificial grass if requested? Can we . . . can we . . . can we . . . ? I am sure that this is only a very short version of a list of possible exceptions or changes requested all over the country every day. Does that mean that we must say yes to all of them? Does that mean that all of us can say yes?

Our challenge, as Catholic cemeterians, is to constantly hold before us a visual image of the caring Jesus Christ, a willingness to respond in the best ministerial fashion, an awareness of our limitations and constrictions, and an openness to newness that allows us to ask whether requests that are being made are contributory to the healing grief process. Coupled with that challenge is the necessity for us to take our rightful place as creative, innovative caregivers with a particular area of expertise to offer those who come seeking our ministerial assistance.

What an exciting challenge!

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