

The New Evangelization

— by Joseph Sankovich

It's the beginning of Fall in New England. I just completed four workshops for 33 parish cemeteries in the Diocese of Metuchen and am now on the train to the Diocese of Burlington where five seminars are scheduled for pastors, parish staff and volunteers who manage and operate the 85+ parochial cemeteries scattered throughout Vermont. October is the perfect time to be on Amtrak heading north and thinking about seminars past and those in the coming week.

Twenty-five years ago, while director of cemeteries in the Archdiocese of Seattle, Archbishop Raymond Hunthausen posed an interesting challenge. In the 20 years since the close of the Second Vatican Council he wondered if the time for Catholic cemeteries might be over, that Catholic cemeteries, because of their restrictive and disciplinary bent, might be something of an era that had outlived their usefulness, that they might in fact be ecumenically divisive.

QUESTION:

Is there a need for Catholic cemeteries in the post-Vatican II Church?

Not one to impose his thoughts, he offered them as a challenge, an invitation to engage in good theological research and development. What he was asking was whether there was still a need for the Catholic cemetery in the post-Vatican II Church.

Never one to simply throw out challenges without providing resources, he invited Father Richard Rutherford, University of Portland in Oregon, Father Charles Skok, Gonzaga University in Spokane, WA, and Father Harvey McIntyre, longtime director of the Washington State Catholic

Conference to assist. The four of us met on a number of occasions and from our work came the first mission statement for Catholic cemeteries in North America.

After careful reading and official promulgation, we convinced Archbishop Hunthausen to share that statement with his brother bishops throughout the United States. I recall his sharing letters of gratitude he received from bishops, not only complimenting him on the document, but asking for permission to adopt or modify it for use in their own dioceses.

As we now approach the 50th anniversary of the convening of the Second Vatican Council, Pope Benedict has called for a new evangelization and that call resonates and connects with the Seattle Catholic Cemeteries Mission Statement of 25 years ago and may even call for it to be refined.

The initial mission identified a significant paradigm shift for Catholic cemeteries, a move away from a tool of discipline to control behavior. To that time, Catholic cemeteries were consecrated ground for the burial of Catholics who were baptized, married in the Church before a priest and two witnesses, registered in and supported their parishes, attended Mass weekly, made their Easter Duty, i.e. received Communion during the Easter Time after dutifully confessing serious sin at least once a year. In a few isolated pockets, that earlier tradition continues with the issuance of "priest lines" which assure cemetery personnel that the individual being received for burial is in fact so entitled.

The new paradigm ... the call of the Catholic cemetery tradition is to **paraclesis, catechesis and evangelization** ... shifts from discipline to sacramental witness. The Catholic cemetery is envisioned as a platform from which

comfort is offered, what the Church believes about life, death, life after death, the dignity of the baptized, the communion of saints, the worth of prayer for the dead, are all pillars holding up that platform.

Questions now twenty-five years later are in order and some might look like these:

1. How has the shift from discipline to a new reality taken place in my cemetery, my parish, my diocese? Am I still simply trying to perform burial services, competing with non-sectarian cemeteries who simply announce that the Catholic Church no longer cares where her beloved deceased members are buried? Am I seeing numbers continue to decline and feeling helpless as Mass attendance drops from 70 - 80% to 20 - 30% on the average weekend? Am I still using traditional means (advertising in parish bulletins) to seek burial activity in my cemeteries?
2. Am I engaging my bishop, pastors, deacons and pastoral ministers in a discussion of the significance of the paradigm shift and seeking their support in doing the catechesis and evangelization required to take the new Catholic cemetery to the grass roots, the families in the pews, those still in bed on Sunday mornings, those injured, harmed or slighted in some way by official representatives of the Church?
3. Am I looking at the various diocesan offices and initiatives as opportunities to use Catholic cemeteries to teach what Catholics have traditionally taught about life, death, life after death, the communion of saints, the worth of prayer for the dead? In times past, have I seen my cemeteries as teaching opportunities? Father Richard Rutherford, many years ago, amplified research that documented a significant openness to ministry at the time of a death in the family.

- This translates into conversations about belief in life after death, the reality of Jesus as the Risen One and His assurance that we would one day join Him and our beloved deceased in eternal life.

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- This translates into the need for the weekly community celebration of Eucharist to awaken and strengthen these beliefs.
- This translates into putting past hurts behind us and joining a community of believers in our march to building the Kingdom until the Lord comes in glory to claim it and present it to the Father.

4. How many cars can I daily count coming through the cemetery gates in each funeral procession? Five, ten, twenty or more? How many people in each car? One, two, four or more? How many are young, middle age, church-goers, alienated, marginalized, hurting, waiting for an outstretched hand of welcome or support? Do the math. Translate the numbers into days, weeks, months, years. How many am I reaching, touching, inviting, reconciling?

With the paradigm shift, have I begun to engage cemetery staffs, pastors, bishops, deacons, teachers in Catholic schools, RCIA directors, catechists, planning and development officers in my diocese, Catholic newspapers, bereavement ministers, hospice personnel to seek out ways in which I can communicate or reinforce something other than a burial site?

What outreaches have I made to funeral directors? What materials have I developed for parishes and funeral homes, for Web sites, for Memorial Day that speaks to the value of visiting the Catholic cemetery for prayer and reconciliation? What workshops have I developed and offered to families who have buried loved ones in our cemeteries to connect them with each other and with the ministry of the cemetery?

Have I thought about opportunities for people to become involved? For "Friends of our Cemeteries" who are able to do things I'd like to do but don't have staff, time, finances to accomplish, i.e. special floral displays, celebrations of Vespers in Advent, Way of the Cross in Lent, networking, burial societies to afford special care for the indigent, to assure their graves are identified;

provide extra care for the graves of infants and children in sections that so easily become overburdened with inappropriate decorations.

Have I considered asking for help in developing a database for a newsletter and people willing to tell their stories and enroll others in this special Corporal Work of Mercy? Have I begun to consider what Jesus meant when he said, "Let the dead bury the dead?" Have I made homily suggestions to those who will preach in my cemetery or about my cemetery at their parishes? Have I made concrete suggestions about the need to be as concerned about feeding the hungry and clothing the naked as decorating graves with Christmas blankets, an abundance of flowers, statues, plaques, fences, decorative rocks, vigil lights. Have I done any catechesis around sharing decorating opportunities, asking those whose turn it is to take the opportunity to donate to a food bank in honor of a loved one? Have I done anything to convince the bereaved to move the winter coats and other apparel of their beloved dead from their closets onto the backs of the cold and homeless? All to remember their loved ones and honor their memory by doing as Jesus would do and have us do?

When we wrote the mission statement in 1985, catechesis meant teaching to the baptized what the Church believes about life, death and life after death. Evangelization meant teaching the same last things to those who were not members of the Catholic faith. Pope Benedict is making a realignment with his "New Evangelization." moving the marginalized and alienated from opportunities for catechesis to challenges for evangelization.

What is he saying? That their faith is weaker? Their hearts are more hardened? The task of reaching them more of a challenge? Today's reality is far from the days shortly after the close of the Second Vatican Council. Perhaps these are all possibilities.

One thing we know for sure, however, is that the longer we delay, the more difficult it will become. Throughout North

America Catholic cemeteries have lost, on average, 1% of their burial numbers each year since 1966, the close of the Second Vatican Council. That means that many dioceses are experiencing a decline of 40% or more. My work in over 40 dioceses verifies these statistics.

Traditional cemetery wisdom has always taught that once we lose one member of a family, we will continue to lose subsequent generations. At what point do I take a stand, call for a major intervention? Is it not the role of the Catholic cemetery director to catechize and evangelize his/her bishop, pastors, parish staffs, diocesan department heads in this new evangelization?

Gospel mandates are quite clear in these realities. If I understand the contemporary worth of the Catholic cemetery, if I have witnessed the good that the cemetery has done in supporting the bereaved through their journey to healing, if I have the tools, the language, the experience, am I not expected to muster the energy? Am I not called forth to bear witness?

While we recognize that Catholic cemeteries are increasingly becoming lay ministerial services, we must also recognize that, without a solid theological foundation, we are not positioned and able to articulate the new paradigm for Catholic cemeteries and make the contribution we are expected to make from our positions in building the Kingdom of the Lord until He comes in Glory. That day when the trumpet will sound, graves will break open, and the dead will rise to greet the Lord of Heaven.

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