

The Parish Cemetery Director

Who or What?

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Each year, as an active member of the National Catholic Cemetery Conference Parish Cemetery Committee, I am invited to share something of my knowledge and experience with other members and prospective members of the Conference. Each year I ask myself what would these individuals want that I might be prepared or qualified to offer. Each year I wrestle with this question until I am able to surface a topic that both the editor and I are both comfortable with and only then put pen to paper.

The question of the identity of a parish cemetery director is one which is at the forefront of my mind these days. The identity of any individual who has a direct relationship and involvement with cemeteries and individuals in the state of bereavement is of key concern to me. Recently, on the way to a job interview in California, I had the opportunity to visit with a religious sister who is responsible for the administration of a number of Catholic hospitals on the West Coast. It was in the course of that conversation that the need for this article became more clear to me. Our conversation began the way one usually does when strangers are seated side by side for what promises to be a rather lengthy time. "What kind of work do you do?" "I'm a hospital administrator." "And you?" "I direct a parish cemetery as well as a parish religious education program." "What a strange combination! How did you ever get involved in cemetery work? And isn't that depressing? Why would anyone ever want to do that sort of thing? I would think it most difficult to take that strain."

The conversation turned when I asked, "Do you have a screaming room?" And much to my surprise the response was affirmative. So I took it one step further and asked whether it was just for patients and families or whether it was also available for staff, especially nurses. "Oh, just for families; it's located off the emergency room" And then the twinkling of an idea's coming to blossom became evident in her eye and she said, "Why didn't I think of the tremendous

stress and needs of staff, especially nurses, to ventilate those feelings?" And I felt at that point that what I am doing as a cemetery director/religious education director/grief facilitator/counselor came into focus. Hence, the article began to take form somewhat as a statement, somewhat as a challenge, definitely as a way to encourage others who are deeply involved in the ministry of cemetery work and who all too often bear the cruel burden of negative comments.

As a parish cemetery director, who am I, what am I expected to do, what should I have by way of qualifications and training, am I a professional, do I have a significant contribution to make, in what areas am I supposed to be competent? All of these are especially difficult questions when it comes to the situation of the parish administrator of a cemetery; more often than not, in a small cemetery, the role may be an avocation rather than a full-time occupation. In many instances, it is another of the hats that the pastor wears. In recent years, I have asked a number of parish pastors whether they would be interested in beginning parish cemeteries. Without exception, the universal response has been an emphatic "NO THANKS! I HAVE ENOUGH HEADACHES!" To me that says that we have a long way to go in order to identify the good ministerial opportunities that exist by having a parish cemetery. We need to first address those who have the parish cemetery already in existence and are thus confronted with the question of "What do I do with it?"

It is my proposition that the first step to take in identifying what to do with IT is really to identify what to do with ME. By clarification of what the demands are for the administration of a parish cemetery, we ought to be able to clean up the situation enough to take it beyond the level of headache to one of a facility existing in the parish to serve the needs of the parish family at times of the greatest openness to Christian ministry and healing. In order for one charged with the administration of a parish cemetery to see this

dimension of his/her work, it is first of all necessary to be:

- 1) a competent administrator
- 2) a knowledgeable salesperson
- 3) a sensitive public relations director
- 4) a landscape architect
- 5) a financial analyst
- 6) a psychological counselor
- 7) an up-to-date theologian
- 8) a maintenance/field operation wizard fix-it person.

All of these areas of expertise are of no value unless they are couched within the spectrum of the funeral/cemetery industries; in and of itself, that is no small order to fill. Where does one obtain these skills? Certainly other experiences are pertinent and applicable. Certainly on-the-job training, of the sink-or-swim variety, happens. The expertise of other successful administrators in the locale are more often than not available for the asking. Then there are the funeral directors, monument dealers, parish staff, cemetery board of directors who are all willing and able to respond out of their own fields with suggestions as well as help. Of course, not to be forgotten, and to be held in high esteem is the variety of publications from the National Catholic Cemetery Conference, especially *The Parish Cemetery Handbook*.

Having arrived at this point, however, I would submit to you that we are really only half-way home. We are now covering the basics, effectively administering and maintaining a parish property, responsibly planning for the future security and beauty of the established cemetery. Perhaps, in one administration, this is as far as it will be possible to go. There may be an unsightly mess to deal with; there may be a lack of records and the necessity to embark on a program of gathering and completing records; there may be no rules and regulations governing the cemetery; there may be no board of directors; there may be no sound fiscal planning. All of these are items which will have to be dealt with on an immediate basis.

Dealing, however, with these questions at the same time as one deals with the personal questions of "Who am I in this position?" "What am I supposed to be here?" "How can I really use this platform to perform the ministry to which I am charged?" should certainly go a long way to help frame the decisions in a philosophical/theological context of ministering to our parish families at a time when they are most open to ministry, most in need of a strengthening of Resurrection Faith, most vulnerable to those who are willing in some way to manifest the caring Christ to them.

Then, within this context, it is possible to move toward a new definition of a parish cemetery administrator which is positive and not negative, which is seen as an opportunity and not a burden, which is held in high esteem for the potential for good at the command of the individual, which one may be proud to assert rather than become the butt for

ridicule and low esteem.

The parish cemetery administrator is a professional individual, faith-living person, lay or religious, who has at his/her fingertips expertise in the following areas: administration, sales, landscape, finance, theology, and compassion. The parish cemetery administrator is an individual who holds a sacred trust, recognizing the degree of vulnerability of those he/she serves, and seeks to find ways and means to cause the Resurrection Faith to come alive and be sustained in self and those who choose to use the services of the parish cemetery.

Within this context, it is then possible to fashion a job description which causes an individual to stand tall in a group, to be as proud of his/her vocation as any other profession, be that doctor, lawyer, accountant, clergy person.

We indeed are in a marvelous time. We have the opportunity to take the raw material of an as yet untapped resource in parish life and make it perform a much needed contemporary service. We have the opportunity to make of our cemeteries much more than places of burial. For example, we have the chance to make our cemeteries teaching classrooms for the young, teaching both history and grief-resolution and the reality of death. We have the chance to educate the public on the nature of Resurrection Faith. We have an opportunity to use our cemeteries as a pulpit to communicate respect for life, esteem for persons both living and dead. We have the chance to use our cemeteries as a manifestation of a caring Church, a tool for the notion of parish as family, that group which lives together and dies together. We have a chance to use our cemeteries as an opportunity for healing. All of these, certainly, go well beyond the spectrum of burial of the dead, selling of rights to burial, maintenance of grounds. Anyone can do that!

We have the gift, the charge, the challenge, to live Faith, to spread the Good News, to serve our people with compassion, to know ourselves, our own griefs and losses, to resolve those and thus free ourselves to minister to those who most deeply need our expertise at the most difficult of times.

My own particular path toward this end has been an interesting one. Having fallen into parish cemetery work by default, and really enjoying the challenge of reclamation/reactivation, I found myself in somewhat of a rut when these matters were under control. Having a small cemetery, running smoothly, self-sufficient, became a "no challenge" situation. What to do? Thank the Spirit for inspiration and a gradual unfolding of an awareness that much more than effective administration was necessary for this neglected aspect of parish life.

At the same time, the necessity for dealing with personal questions of death and dying, the loss of significant friends, life situations, became a vehicle which propelled me toward the work of Dr. Elisabeth Kubler-Ross, and the experience of a "Life, Death and Transition Workshop" in 1978. From that experience, as a cemetery director and religious education director, I have had the opportunity to offer a "Personal Death Awareness" seminar in a variety of

parishes in the greater Detroit area. Once one begins to deal with his/her own losses, empties the pool of repressed grief, it is amazing the kind of help by listening one is able to offer. Of course, once having had the first workshop, it became apparent that more emptying was necessary and so I am fresh back from "Intensive Growth Workshop — Psychodrama" which is a continuation of the first workshop and an opportunity to do both academic work in understanding the growing personality and its experience of loss as well as to do personal grief work, getting in touch with experiences of significant emotional trauma, the variety of losses/pains that we all experience in a lifetime and most often repress rather than allow to ventilate.

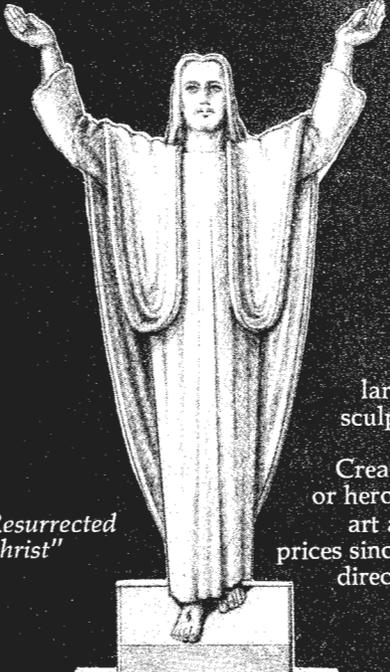
Coming back, having taken the lid off of so much of this, a new energy, a new creativity is mine. I have a challenge to continue to do this growth work, to apply what I have learned not only to my own life, but to bring what I have into the work place. I have a challenge to more effectively function, perform my ministries, because I am not held back by fears, excess baggage of my own emotional life which all too often gets in the way, and keeps me from being an effective listener. I have a challenge to be a creative and responding individual who recognizes needs above and beyond the day-to-day business of administering a cemetery and find ways in which to meet those needs in the name of Christ and Church. I have a

challenge to demonstrate in a concrete fashion that the Church has meaning in this day and age, testifying that parish cemeteries are an essential aspect of parish life and do whatever I can to assist others to creatively respond to the needs of those who come to them with the solemn charge of burying their dead and helping them put back together the pieces of their lives.

Within that context then, I, as a parish cemetery administrator, not only perform the day-to-day functions necessary to effectively operate a cemetery, but also am a resource person for a high school bereavement group, member of a city bereavement resource association, and publish a newsletter. I have just completed a part in a television documentary on death and dying ten years later, lecture on grief and its resolution to high school students, conduct a "Personal Death Awareness Workshop" for a variety of audiences, do individual counseling and provide a referral service for those with needs I am not competent to handle.

All of this makes it possible to engage the sister on the airplane in conversation which reflects professionals who deal with intense, emotionally traumatic situations interacting in a very positive way because both are extremely proud of who we are and what we do. We both are eagerly looking for new and better ways to more effectively serve not only those who come for our skills, but those who work in conjunction with us in our institutions.

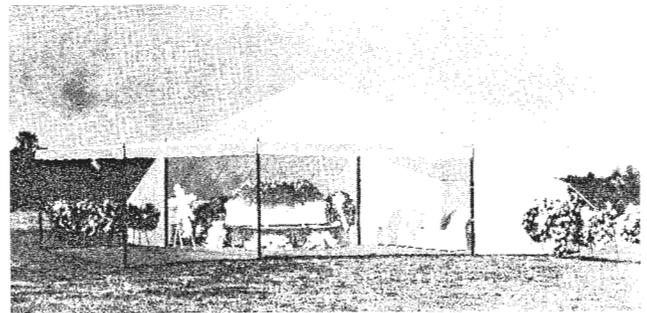
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