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## **THE PARISH CEMETERY — LOST TRADITION OR NEW CHALLENGE?**

Catapulted into our present reality by both the teachings of Vatican Council II and the strong statement made in both print and visual media presentations of *Roots*, I am inclined to share with you some reflections on the history of our parish cemetery and its important place in the life of Sacred Heart Parish. It is my desire, through this reflection, to make a case for not only the preservation and operation of this particular cemetery and others sharing its past, but to demonstrate the need for the inclusion of a parish cemetery in the planning and operation of the general parish. While, over the course of the past number of years, we have moved toward the larger diocesan cemetery as a standard response to our obligation to care for our beloved deceased and have found it possible to offer a great variety of services in a manner of much more reasonable financial outlay, nonetheless, there still remains a demonstrable need for and ability to provide this facility and service on a parish level and respond to a totally different need in a most creative fashion.

Mount Kelly is a parish cemetery. A look at the history of the development of the parish and the

cemetery may allow many to identify with a similar situation and thus account for much of the negativity surrounding the operation of old parish cemeteries or the establishment of new parish cemeteries. Mount Kelly was opened in 1856, using land donated by one of the local farmers. The three and one-half acres were thought to be more than sufficient and thus family plots were laid out with a generous walkway on all four sides. Graves were sold for \$1.00 each as a general rule, with those in prime locations being sold for \$1.25 each. The cemetery was governed by a board of directors which included the farmer who donated the land for the cemetery. While this first group of men lived, the cemetery seemed to operate with little difficulty. Written records were kept and there was an orderly accounting of the operation of the cemetery. When we approach the turn of the century, however, things begin to deteriorate rapidly. We know at that point there was a sexton in charge of the cemetery. He, of course, was responsible for everything from digging graves to record keeping, grass cutting and setting of markers. For a variety of reasons, most of which can only be speculation at this point, his record keeping system was neatly contained in his uncanny memory. Of course, during this time, the parish was growing rapidly, the city developing around the cemetery, the beginnings of thoughts of a large parish church came into being, and a concern for Catholic education came to the front of peoples' priorities. Early in the 1900's we experienced the rapid growth of the parish. Despite World War I and the Great Depression, we found our people constructing a church and a school. In subsequent years, the building continues until we see a rectory, a convent and a high school. All of these projects, while deemed quite necessary at the time, so consumed the time and energies of the priestly staff that the parish cemetery, with the death of the sexton and the loss of his valuable records, made the operation or development of the parish cemetery virtually impossible. Of course, while the years were passing by rapidly, the prices of graves in the parish cemetery included no provision for perpetual care and the maintenance of the cemetery in the 1960's and 1970's, with other demands for parish funds having a high priority, became increasingly difficult. It is little wonder that the succession of pastors and associates would have a hard time thinking in terms of establishing a parish cemetery when they moved on from this situation into another parish. And yet, the one undeniable dictum which has caused Mount Kelly to come back, to be reactivated and developed into a parish service organization, is the strong conviction of the people that indeed they are the parish, they are the stable group of people who continue to be Sacred Heart.

While they love and respect priests who have come to them and served them for years at a time, nonetheless, the underlying realization that they emphasize to their ordained leadership is that after their priests have come and gone, they will still be present with their faith, their needs, their loves, their convictions, their hopes and the identity of their

parish and its life intact. With that reasoning, a group of these people gathered together to reclaim their parish cemetery. Because of the stable nature of the city of Dearborn, and its identification with Henry Ford and Greenfield Village, there is a great amount of time and effort put forth to gather and preserve the history of the city and its people. When Henry Ford established Greenfield Village, he hoped to forever capture the American way of life before the introduction of electricity, the automobile and the airplane. With the Dearborn Historical Museum we can find the presentation of the refinement of these three significant contributions to the American way of life. As a consequence, the people of Sacred Heart, people of Dearborn, whose families have a long history in the area, are a people most conscious of their past and anxious to take steps to preserve their past. Those efforts finally have taken root in the parish cemetery and we have been able to find generous support for the work of reclamation and redevelopment of the cemetery grounds into not only a significant statement about the history of the people of Sacred Heart, Dearborn, but also a meaningful institution that speaks to the present needs of the parish and the general community in which it is located. Certainly, the movement from the debacle of the past into the present reality was neither quickly or easily accomplished. After almost ten years of effort, we are finally seeing the light at the end of the tunnel. The efforts, the steps, the successes and the failures, would constitute an article all by itself. My hope, however, in the present situation, is to speak to the reality of the needs of the present and how these needs are being met by the parish cemetery.

Exactly what are the advantages of the parish cemetery? Is it integral to the life of a parish? Can it be operated in a real service context, meeting people with a real need and responding to that need? Is it too much trouble? Do we lack the skills necessary to begin such a program? How do we go about it? Will we get in "over our heads" and create the same situation of deterioration spoken of earlier?

The key concept of parish ministry, it seems to me, is that we must be accepting and understanding of people where they are, and not where we would hope them to be either theologically or practically speaking. As a rule, a parish community is a gathering of people, believers in Jesus, who come together to share their joy and sorrow, their work and prayer. Certainly, at the base of this gathering is the firm conviction that Jesus Christ has been raised from the dead into a new life. And in so far as we are believers in Jesus and the redemption accomplished through Him, we shall participate in this new life, resurrection from the dead. Within this context, every act we celebrate becomes an affirmation of this belief. It would only seem natural, then, that the early Christians, so aware of the close identification of their faith to life and death, would take steps to be most solicitous of the care of their beloved deceased membership.

In contemporary times, we are still practitioners of the same Faith, the same belief, the same hope that

one day we will come together to share in the eternal life of resurrection. Easter is our major celebration of this awareness, and yet every other celebration in our parish family speaks to the same reality. It then becomes obvious that we have not only an obligation to care for our dead in such a fashion that their care bespeaks our faith, but we also have within our grasp a tremendous teaching tool which reinforces our faith, our belief in life after death. That teaching tool, that anomaly, that care for the dead speaks about life and living, can be fleshed out in the following experiences.

Mount Kelly, as a parish cemetery, touches the parish organization in an organized and systematic way. It is considered part of the Christian Service Commission, a subsidiary of the Parish Council. The cemetery is governed by a board of directors who are called out of the general parish community. These are lay men and women who have talents and interests that become expertise valuable to the development and operation of the cemetery. We have lawyers, doctors, psychiatrists, accountants, historical research people, hands on landscaping and construction types. This group meets twice each year and, under the guidance of the director of the cemetery, reviews what has transpired within the past six months and makes plans for the future six months; this group also includes the pastor of the parish. Because most of these individuals have family members buried in the parish cemetery, they take their responsibility quite seriously. They range in age from thirty-five to eighty. Because of the diversity, the sense of history is preserved and a climate of creative response to genuine need is encouraged and supported.

To continue the argument for the existence of the parish cemetery, it is necessary to be on the grounds of the cemetery and interacting with people there. As a parttime director of the cemetery, as well as a member of the board of directors, my role varies from office procedures and records, public relations and development, to maintenance and sales. It is because I am able to be on the grounds several days each week that I am able to speak to the validity of the existence of the parish cemetery.

First of all, because of the closeness to the family residences, visitation in Mount Kelly is quite high. That's one of the primary reasons that people purchase grave space in the parish cemetery. It shares some of the same arguments we hear advanced for the continuation of the neighborhood school.

Mount Kelly is small. People coming into the cemetery are not disoriented, wondering where on sixty to two hundred acres their family members are buried. They know exactly where the spaces they have purchased are located, who is buried in the near vicinity, and oftentimes they will select burial sites to be near those with whom they have lived and worked in their parish.

Mount Kelly responds in a way that is only possible with a small cemetery to people who grieve the loss of their loved ones. When we look to the history of how people resolved their grief, we can find accounts of the men of the family going out to physically dig the

grave, carry the casket to the grave site, lower it by hand, and participate in the covering of the remains with the very visible pile of dirt which was placed alongside the grave. The women participated by preparing the body, washing and clothing it, preparing a lining for the casket which had been constructed by the family men. In other words, people had something to do, some way to actively work out their emotions, their love and devotion, their anger and frustration, their fear as well as their hope. The technology of the present age has removed all of these opportunities from us. We are no longer able to function in this fashion, and oftentimes repress these emotions and find that they come out at a later time in a totally different and oftentimes unhealthy fashion.

Mount Kelly responds to these needs, these awarenesses that such emotions need to be worked out. In a parish cemetery, it is very possible to see those who are having a difficult time adjusting to their loss. Each of the situations is known. The circumstances surrounding death can be ascertained with little difficulty, and some appropriate method of response generated. For example, a parish cemetery can make tremendous use of volunteer help. In Mount Kelly last year, the parish ushers were asked to come forward and assume responsibility for painting the chain link fence that surrounds the cemetery, a task impossible for the one person regularly engaged in cemetery maintenance. They came eagerly, most were lotholders, some with members of their families already buried in the cemetery, and their labor was one of love.

At the same time, a number of these people brought spouses and discussed the reality of their need to take the initial step of pre-need purchase of grave spaces; the concrete identification with the cemetery and their work helped them to begin to face the reality of their own terminality, and out of that awareness, they acted responsibly and took significant steps in their personal growth.

A member of the parish community suggested that the parish cemetery needed a flagpole; he took steps to have one donated. When the parish community was informed through the cemetery newsletter of the need for a flag for the new flagpole, the first person to come forward was a recent widow who buried her husband, a veteran, in Mount Kelly. Quite by accident, we discovered that the flagpole we erected was of a dimension that was correct for the display of a flag the size that is used to cover the casket of a veteran. A step to grief resolution, a comfort to her and her family, is the knowledge that this flag flying over the cemetery once covered her husband's remains and flies as a testimony to his love of country. Through our newsletter, we will encourage others who have similar flags stored away in some closet to bring them forth and allow them to be flown in the cemetery.

Mount Kelly, as was previously mentioned, was neglected for quite a number of years. One man, whose father-in-law is buried in the cemetery, has come every Saturday for the entire Fall and Spring

with his equipment and trimmed each and every tree in the cemetery; he used to do this work professionally for the city and now chose to donate this service to the cemetery.

A number of widows who love to work with plants and flowers come to the cemetery regularly and work on the flowerbeds, all on a volunteer basis.

All of these people have a strong love for their beloved deceased, but at the same time also have a love for their Church. They are more than willing, given the opportunities, to come forth and share their talents. Indeed, the parish community grows because there is tremendous interaction among these people. The faith of the parish church is strengthened because the concrete reality of belief in life after death is right in front of them as they are at work in the cemetery.

Indeed, when one is involved in any fashion with a volunteer system, there is a tremendous amount of energy devoted to organizational details; much time has to be spent on the phone. But we are all quite aware that each and every parish would be doomed if it were not for volunteers. My belief is that this volunteer system, so long as there is one trained person involved in the operation of the parish cemetery to guarantee continuity, is most appropriate for the parish cemetery and is thus a significant contributor to the general life and faith testimony of the Church. Indeed, where people come together to work and pray, to laugh and cry, and find each other willing to share in these experiences, there the Risen Christ is truly present and working.

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