

# The Intrinsic Value of the Catholic Cemetery

## Getting the Word Out!

by Joseph B. Sankovich

In 1979 Archbishop Rembert Weakland of Milwaukee offered three challenges to the Catholic Cemetery Conference membership at its annual convention. They continue to have value within the context of this topic.

They include:

1. Become involved in some fashion in grief ministry.
2. Work on Resurrection/hope symbols. Make Catholic cemeteries into places where one senses action, expectancy, desire, excitement, waiting and rising again.
3. Take a renewed look at parish communities to help in making them vital, living, faith communities where, *"the dead are right there, still living as part of the community."*

Some have taken these challenges seriously and have taken positive steps in one or more of these areas. Perhaps others have too much to do already or are simply waiting to see how these initiatives have worked out. Others may be looking for creative ideas for implementation.

Some new thoughts based on 25 years of information and experience as to how these challenges might be addressed follow. In the mid-1980's we offered a "Catholic Cemetery Mission Statement" from the Archdiocese of Seattle. It focused on paraclesis [the ministry of comfort], catechesis and evangelization as the three challenges facing our Catholic cemetery ministry.

Grief ministry, expressed by being sensitive to the needs of the bereaved as they either make arrangements, conduct burial services or visit the cemetery, continues to be a major concern. It appears that we have a variety of contemporary challenges in this arena. One need only review contemporary cemetery literature to see a major focus on personalization. How, our non-sec-

tarian cemetery competitors ask, can we increase opportunities for personalization of graves, crypts and niches?

Is this the same question that Catholic cemeterians should be asking? How often are we challenged on the need for a cross or some other religious symbol on a memorial or monument when family members may prefer golf clubs or a fishing pole? Have we come to recognize the change in the religious identity/preferences of those who are now making

funeral arrangements for Catholic parents who practiced their religion and raised their children in the faith? How do we bridge the gap between personalized memorials and prayer for the deceased?

### Challenges: Catechesis and Evangelization

This takes us to the next two mission challenges: catechesis and evangelization. We are losing our Catholic funeral and cemetery tradition. One need only look at the declining numbers in Catholic Church membership, grave side committal services without a Funeral Mass or today's percentage of use of Catholic cemeteries.

Work obviously needs to be done in this area, but where do we start? There is no point in raising issues or problems without offering possible solutions. Here are some thoughts, with an invitation to anyone involved in this ministry to amplify the list and offer success stories.

*Education is a key.* First, we need to make sure that we are current in our own understanding of Catholic faith. Then, we need to look at helping to develop and distribute materials for the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA), Catholic high schools and religious education programs, Confirmation classes and other adult programs where appropriate. A curriculum for seminary students would help. Handbooks for pastors and parish staffs supporting diocesan cemeteries and workshops for parish cemetery pastors, staff and volunteers are also effective. I've met hundreds of priests and lay ministers in this fashion, and their feedback has been very positive.

Brochures, handouts as well as training of pre-need and family service counselors are always appropriate.

*Actions speak loudly.* Create opportunities to pray for our dead. Do more than a Mem-

orial Day or All Souls Day Mass. There are always Lauds, Vespers and Compline. There can be prayer gardens and alcoves in mausoleums. Prayer cards and brochures can document Catholic theology and practice.

*Create opportunities to pray for our dead. There can be prayer gardens and alcoves in the mausoleums.*

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## Intrinsic Value *(continued)*

**An open/listening attitude.** Rules and regulations continually need to be updated. Are yours meeting current needs? Have you addressed the impact of West Nile Virus on your decoration regulations? When you make a prohibition, do you offer an alternative? Do you know what people want? Have you thought about ways that needs can be accommodated without compromising the vision/mission of your Catholic cemetery ministry?

It's obvious that the clientele has changed. We are now more open to those of other faiths being buried in our cemeteries when they are related to Catholics. But, have we taken the time to explain the implications of burial in Catholic cemeteries? Have we taken note of the different expectations that come with different clientele? Have we accommodated different Catholic ethnic groups now making use of Catholic cemeteries?

**Religious Acts Offered for the Dead.** While Catholics don't have a corner on the market of good works, we certainly have a track record! How can Catholic cemeteries participate in the various Corporal and Spiritual Works of Mercy? We already addressed one from each list, i.e., to bury the dead and to comfort the afflicted and pray for the living and the dead. Ask if there are better ways to do what we do, including seeking feedback from the bereaved, visitors, pastors, celebrants, funeral directors and monument dealers.

For those unfamiliar with the complete list of the Corporal and Spiritual Works of Mercy, they are as follows:

### Corporal Works of Mercy:

- To feed the hungry and give drink to the thirsty
- To clothe the naked and shelter the homeless
- To visit the sick and imprisoned
- To bury the dead

### Spiritual Works of Mercy:

- To instruct the ignorant, counsel the doubtful and admonish sinners

- To bear wrongs patiently and forgive offences willingly
- To comfort the afflicted and to pray for the living and the dead

My thoughts go immediately to the first two corporal works of mercy, i.e., feeding and clothing. We have a significant network of St. Vincent de Paul Societies. Their works are focused in these areas and, with some creativity, we may be able to assist them. Have we considered food collections on holidays? Facilitating donation of the no-longer-needed clothing of the deceased? Asking large families with many people wanting to decorate graves to parcel out the opportunities while others take on various Corporal Works of Mercy on behalf of the deceased? After all, our faith teaches that these are religious acts that can be offered for the dead, and they have meaning!

In the article, "Life and Death Lessons From John Paul II," we started out with the example of John Paul's mandate "*Be Not Afraid.*" We took that concept to its positive counterpart, courage. We concluded with thoughts about innovation requiring courage. There are many new Catholic cemetery directors, both diocesan and parish, and there are many long-standing and effective Catholic cemetery directors. It is very important that courage underpin the motivation for old and new to come together to share ideas, offer possibilities and report examples of how things have worked and failed so that this ministry can continue making its valuable contribution to the Church and to the Kingdom and give testimony to the worth of the life and ministry of John Paul II. ■

Joseph B. Sankovich, CCE, Tucson, AZ, is a CCC supplier member and a contributing writer to *Catholic Cemetery*. Joe may be reached at (520) 546-9720 or online at [www.sankovich.com](http://www.sankovich.com).



## A Request for Your Help

Father Charles Crespo, the pastor of Our Lady of Mt. Carmel Catholic Church in the U.S. Virgin Islands, contacted the Catholic Cemetery Conference recently with the following request for assistance:

"Catholics often have sacred vessels, statues and other items dedicated in the name of a deceased loved one and then do not know where to donate these items. Sometimes funeral homes also do not know where to direct these items. I am the pastor of a small Catholic Church in the U.S. Virgin Islands that is set to open by the end of the year. We are short of funds, so we would welcome these new items as donations. Please help me circulate this information to funeral operators."

Father Crespo may be reached at Our Lady of Mt. Carmel Catholic Church, P.O. Box 241 Cruz Bay, St. John, U.S. Virgin Islands 00831-0241, [olmc@hotmail.com](mailto:olmc@hotmail.com).