

# *Electronically Promoting The Catholic Cemetery Tradition*

by Joseph B. Sankovich

Those who work in the Roman Catholic cemetery tradition today face the issue of what the non-sectarian cemeterians call "heritage." By that, they mean the ability to sell goods and services to the relatives of those families who already use their facilities.

From our perspective, however, we are less interested in "heritage" than a preservation of our religious tradition, a continuation of our ministry, which finds some of its roots in our Judaic ancestry. We wish as much to underscore the value of our tradition as to "sell" Catholics on the use of Catholic cemeteries in order to guarantee our own future.

In this day and age, utilization of Catholic cemeteries by Catholics is undermined by two factors. In the first instance since Vatican II, the rules for mandated use of Catholic cemeteries have been relaxed. In the absence of a well-understood theology of Catholic burial tradition, such relaxation has greatly reduced Catholic use of Catholic cemeteries. Secondly, the non-sectarian cemeteries have rushed into this void with pre-need programs, combinations of cemeteries and funeral homes and the creation of "Catholic sections" in their cemeteries.

How have we, as Catholic cemeterians, responded to this type of pressure from the non-sectarians who now seem to be assuming the posture that they, in fact, have a right to the business of the Catholic family seeking burial service?

In the first place, we must develop a faith-building, educational stance with as much information being given to families in written fashion as possible. We have avoided the customary sales techniques of "talking up a prospect to a higher-priced alternative." We must continue to investigate and tell the story of how our Catholic cemeteries came into existence and how they continue to support the variety of ministries in which today's Roman Catholic Church is involved.

Many of us are now recognizing that there is much more that must be done if we are going to save our tradition and afford families the variety of benefits associated with burial in a Catholic cemetery. As we continue to recognize the

high percentage of Catholics who are no longer registered in parishes, but still have allegiance to the Church and have parents, brothers and/or sisters buried in one of our Catholic cemeteries, then we have to take approaches beyond the traditional utilization of the parish list in a Catholic pre-need effort to seek them out and welcome them home to the Church and the variety of ministries (including Catholic cemeteries) that are available for their support.

Use of electronic media offers an exciting potential for spreading our message. In the Archdiocese of Seattle, we have cultivated a working relationship with the Archdiocesan Telecommunications Office. Associated with UNDA, this office is a subscriber to *Real to Reel*, a weekly television magazine-type program that presents vignettes of Catholic faith and life in action in the world in which we live. Our Telecommunications Office merges national coverage with locally produced segments.

Initially, we investigated the possibility of a segment to uncover and promote the tradition of Catholic burial in Catholic cemeteries. The director of the Telecommunications Office was enthusiastic in his response and immediately personnel from the Cemeteries Office were made available to help research this question and assist in designing an approximately seven-minute segment for televising close to Easter time. That segment was quite well received locally and has been repeated a number of times. Since the appearance of that first segment, a number of other shorter meditations about Resurrection, the Communion of Saints, and Priesthood have been produced in cooperation with Catholic cemeteries and filmed in one of the Associated Catholic Cemeteries of the Archdiocese. Inasmuch as *Real to Reel* is a subscription service, that first segment was submitted to the national level and has been picked up by a number of other subscribing dioceses. Currently, there are over thirty (arch)dioceses that subscribe to *Real to Reel* and others are able to purchase special programs that are sponsored by them.

There are many other areas to be explored through the means of broadcast media. There are possibilities for topics such as the pre-need counselling expe-

rience of the Catholic cemetery, the religious art of the Catholic cemetery, the history of the Catholic cemetery movement in any particular geography, the parish cemetery as integrated into the overall concept of parish ministry, grief and bereavement in the Catholic cemetery, and even how the Church became involved in cemeteries in the first place.

Where does one start? Contact your local (arch)diocese in the area of Communications or Telecommunications. Find out if you are a subscriber to *Real to Reel*. If you are, you might want to suggest the Seattle segment on Catholic cemeteries for at least a preview by cemetery personnel to see if it might meet your needs. You might also surface the concerns that you have about the need to reach out to as broad a base as possible to help continue the tradition of Catholic burial in Catholic cemeteries. In that context, looking at your local situation, history, interesting dimensions to your work, you might make some suggestions for possible topics. Be prepared for some work, but be open and willing to be challenged. The end product is well worth the effort. You will find a new and exciting dimension to your work and some wonderful people with whom to work. You may find ways of promoting Catholic cemeteries that never came to mind. You will certainly find people who know what audience taste, interests, and needs are. By all means, if you are able to do something, let the rest of us know; we may be able to facilitate its airing in our own localities, thus, presenting the reality of our Catholic burial tradition and its universal character. ■

## **Editor's Note:**

Mr. Sankovich has provided NCCC with a copy of a VCR tape of three segments which have appeared on *Real to Reel*. This tape will be shown during the 1988 Convention at the IDEA EXCHANGE area in the Exhibit Hall. Stop by and see it!

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