

# The Next Great Challenge

— by Joseph Sankovich

Integral to the work of the Catholic cemeterian are two realities, i.e. the Order of Christian Funerals (including the Wake, the Funeral Mass with the body present, and the Committal Service) and the Catholic cemetery (diocesan, parish, religious order).

Burial in non-sectarian cemeteries as the first challenge came from within when the bishops returned to North America and determined that the time of death was not appropriate for the Church to use a Catholic cemetery as a disciplinary tool. Today, with my experience in over 1,400 Catholic cemeteries, the impact has been staggering: Catholic cemeteries as a general rule have lost about 1% of burials each year since the close of the Second Vatican Council so that use of Catholic cemeteries is down by 50% or more in some areas.

Cremation is still identified as a challenge and that also came from within, with the bishops gradually relaxing that discipline from first needing chancery approval, to needing only a pastor's approval, to needing no approval at all, and now being able to bring cremated remains to church for a funeral

liturgy. Consequently, several realities are now becoming apparent.

The first may be found in reading the parish death registers where no location for burial is identified in many, if not most, situations where cremation has been selected. The second is electing something more simple and compressed rather than the celebration of all three elements of the Order of Christian Funerals. The third is retention of cremated remains by the family for unknown purposes. The fourth is commingling of cremated remains, placing cremated remains within the casketed remains of another, scattering of cremated remains, or abandoning these remains at the funeral home.

One need only read the secular cemetery professional magazines to clearly see the next challenge for the Catholic cemetery/cemeterian might be identified as "*the celebrant phenomenon*." This challenge, like so many others, comes from both within and outside the Church itself.

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So, what are some simple and appropriate responses that the Catholic cemetery might advocate within the scope of his/her influence. The following quickly come to mind:

1. Within the defined market area for every diocesan and parish cemetery, contact each parish and ask that the Catholic cemetery or cemeteries serving each parish be identified in the same area of the parish bulletin as the parish school, religious education or other program offered through/for the parish. Provide a simple statement such as "The Catholic cemetery that serves XXXXX Parish is XXXXX. Then provide the address and contact telephone number and Website if there is one.

A. The first corollary to this action is that neither diocesan nor parish cemeteries should have to pay to advertise in parish bulletins.

B. The second corollary to this action is that non-sectarian cemeteries should not, by diocesan policy, be able to advertise in parish bulletins.

C. The third corollary to this action is that non-sectarian cemetery advertisements should not be accepted in diocesan newspapers.

D. The fourth corollary to this action is that diocesan newspapers should not by policy accept personal ads for the disposition of graves, crypts or niches in non-sectarian cemeteries.

2. Within every parish bulletin that I have seen over the past 40 years of my involvement in Catholic cemetery ministry are highlighted the steps that one must take to have a child baptized or a marriage take place in church. *In very few instances have I ever seen a statement of what to do for a funeral.*

At a very minimum, there should be a statement something like, "With very few exceptions, every baptized Catholic is entitled to the full prayer of the Church at the time of death, i.e. the Order of Christian Funerals with Wake, Funeral Mass with the body present, and Committal in a Catholic cemetery. Please call the parish prior to (if possible) or immediately following a death, so that proper arrangements can be made."

A. The first corollary to this action is that diocesan cemetery directors should be in a position to collaborate with diocesan liturgy offices to develop bulletin inserts to amplify the three elements of the Order of Christian Funerals and make these available to all parishes.

B. The second corollary to this action is that diocesan liturgy offices should provide these inserts accompanied by some form of dialog with funeral directors so that they are aware of the reality of the entitlement of the baptized to have the whole church praying for the deceased and celebrating the person's entry into eternal life.

C. The third corollary to this action is for the Catholic cemetery to assure that no interment takes place in any Catholic cemetery without the prayer of the Church accompanying the deceased to his/her interment site while awaiting final resurrection into the communion of saints.

While none of these responses directly challenges the new phenomenon of the secular funeral celebration with the funeral director or his/her surrogate as celebrant, nor do they cause one to wring hands in despair as if nothing can be done about any of these challenges.

Each presents a variety of opportunities for those gifted with the role of advocacy for the Order of Christian Funerals and Catholic cemeteries to suggest and advance approaches and steps that enable both catechesis and also evangelization.

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