

Shrine or Memorial?

— by Joe Sankovich

The Year of Faith, the Call to a New Evangelization, the 50th Anniversary of the Second Vatican Council now converge and afford opportunities for scholarship and mission refinement for those who are serious students of Catholic cemeteries and devoted to their success within the Catholic Church as it works to address the significant societal changes of the 21st century.

Gaudium et Spes, The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, articulates important eschatological concepts about the Church and facets of its rationale for existence, i.e. for the sake of the Kingdom of God. The Church then is “already” and “not yet” as a pilgrim people make their way to the holiness (wholeness) of the Kingdom. And each human individual participates within the Church as a contributor to building this Kingdom through daily living out the call to holiness in individual acts of generosity that continue the pilgrimage.

Chapter II of *Gaudium et Spes* deals with the Community of Mankind and affords the serious and intellectually curious Catholic cemeterian opportunities to grow in awareness through the following titles:

God's Plan Gives Man's Vocation a Communitarian Nature;

The Interdependence of Person and Society;

Promoting the Common Good;

Reverence for the Human Person;

*The Essential Equality of Men;
And Social Justice;*

*More Than An Individual Ethic
Is Required;*

Responsibility and Participation;

The Value of Human Activity;

The Regulation of Human Activity;

*The Rightful Independence of
Earthly Affairs;*

Human Activity as Infected by Sin;

*Human Activity Finds Perfection in
the Paschal Mystery;*

A New Earth and a New Heaven.

Lest this become too esoteric, I'd like to open and amplify the document to the more common challenges faced by today's Catholic cemeterian, i.e. regulating monument content and effectively communicating the need for regulations. From experience we already know that the ability of leadership to effectively communicate the foundation/rationale from which regulations emanate is the key to successful enforcement.



In May 2012, I spent several weeks in Russia and Catholic cemeterian that I've been for some 40 years, I am drawn to the local funeral and cemetery customs. The first decision, whether to get into the line to pass by Lenin's tomb alongside Red Square, was easy – I passed, deciding it would be far more important to experience more customary practices.

Over the years I've seen a multitude of approaches to memorialization. Some monuments and memorials are simple, meeting the typical Catholic cemetery requirement of a cross or other Catholic religious symbol being placed in a prominent position. Others include farm scenes, hunting blinds, family and vacation homes.

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One that still stands out after 20 years is a 5' x 7' polished black monument. It dominated the small parish cemetery, not just because of its size and location adjacent to the main roadway, but because of the engravings. Just below the family name on the front was etched in gold a Rolls Royce convertible – positioned in such a way that it almost seemed that it was ready to drive off the monument. On each side of the monument a bag of golf clubs was engraved.

Some natural, human, particular questions continue to come to mind:

*Who gave permission for it?
Under how much pressure?
With what undue financial
influence for the decision-
maker? Was the deceased
Catholic? With or without
faith? Did the superintendent
resist the request as being inap-
propriate for a Catholic ceme-
tery because there was no
prominent religious symbol?
Did the pastor support or
override the superintendent?
Was the requestor a friend of
the (arch)bishop or a major
contributor to the Church?*

And then come some additional founda-
tional questions — how has the
placement of this monument impact-
ed decisions of subsequent superin-
tendents or pastors who try to assure
that all memorialization in the ceme-
tery contains Catholic symbolism in a
prominent position? Bigger questions:

1. Is the Catholic cemetery the proper venue to create 'shrines' to individuals and their accomplishments/successes?
2. Or might the Catholic cemetery be the proper venue for making manifest the Church's belief in the communion of saints and the expectation that one day we will all join in that march, *When the Saints Go Marching In*?

In Moscow, in the small river towns between Moscow and St. Petersburg, and in St. Petersburg itself are samples of both extremes. The small towns, with their churchyard ceme-
teries still surviving, are populated with small monuments/memorials adorned primarily with the cross that is symbolic of the Orthodox church.

On the other hand, in Moscow there are plenty of burial sites that celebrate Russian rulers and their prominence. Interesting is the manner of church burial for the Russian imperial families. The sarcophagus for each of the individuals, while fashioned from quite expensive stone, are much simpler than what are found in Austria, France, Spain and England.

Appropriate Memorialization in a Catholic Cemetery

So, from the perspective of appropri-
ate memorialization in a Catholic
cemetery, at least three issues bubble
to the top:

1. Is it possible to put helpful language around memorializa-
tion regulations that can com-
municate the variety of reasons
that the Church has typically
required religious identification
on monuments and memorials?
2. When people come to the ceme-
tery with pre-conceived notions
of what they want on a particu-
lar monument or memorial,
what strategies can be developed
that enables the family to accept
the cemetery's regulations?
3. When families are so insistent
in making demands, i.e. 'I want
what I want because I want it,
and I will go as high as I have
to in order to get what I want',
then what is the position, prop-
er response, effective strategy in
interacting with the pastor who
just wants the problem to go
away, or the bishop who seems
compelled to allow the family
to have whatever they want
because of some other involve-
ment/issue.

As difficult as it is to see this in print,
many, if not most, Catholic cemeteri-
ans have had this experience at least
once, if not multiple times.

So far, the best and most effective
strategy to respond to this type of sit-
uation in the small parish cemetery is
to assure the presence of a well-
trained and active lay board of direc-
tors or advisors for the cemetery.

When the cemetery's rules and proce-
dures are implemented by a group of
people who have a vested interest in
the effective administration of the
facility, when leadership has a strong
mission statement upon which to
build, when administrators are
trained and continually updated,
problems seem to diminish and letters
to the chancery seem to go away, or at
least decline in number and intensity.
Not allowing past permissions (mis-
takes) to establish precedents is also
very important.

Here the language of *Gaudium et
Spes, Chapter II*, might be helpful.
Using the thirteen sub-headings, a
review of one's current cemetery reg-
ulations might ask the following
questions:

1. Do the regulations reflect the
community nature of the
cemetery?
2. Do the regulations acknowledge
the sacramental nature of the
cemetery, that the cemetery
has a role in reflecting the
interdependence between
individual and society?
3. Do the regulations reflect the
cemetery's obligation to
promote the *common good*?
4. Do the regulations assure that
what is put on a monument
/memorial contributes to the
required *reverence for the
individual*?
5. Do the regulations assure that
every individual is identified,
contributing to the call for
social justice?

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6. Does supporting material make an effective argument that more than *individualism* must be considered in the design/ placement of a monument/ memorial in a Catholic cemetery?
7. Do regulation and supporting materials communicate the *responsibility* of the cemetery and the desire for *individual participation* in the memorialization process as one path on the journey through grief and bereavement to healing and hope?
8. Do regulations *value the individual's need to participate* in the design of the memorial to the deceased, acknowledging the healing from grief by participation such as this?



9. Do the regulations acknowledge the *need for boundaries* around this participation for placement of the memorial in a communal Catholic facility?
10. Do those making and enforcing memorialization regulations understand the interdependence between government and governed in cemetery regulations?
11. Do those making and enforcing memorialization regulations understand and have coping mechanisms to deal with the imperfection of humans, exacerbated during a time of grief and bereavement?
12. Do those who administer the Catholic cemetery have language around the Paschal Mystery that they can comfortably communicate the worth of prayer for the dead in the Catholic tradition?
13. Do those who enforce these regulations have language around the temporary reality of the cemetery, that this is simply a way-station on the way to the New Heaven, where every tear shall be wiped away?

Every one of the thirteen questions presented should evoke a positive response. If a 'no' or 'maybe' is the response, then an excellent case can be made for formulating some new objectives for the new year that address the shortcomings.

I've yet to read a founding document or mission statement for a Catholic cemetery that promotes the cemetery as a place of shrines for individuals and their accomplishments.

There is a statue of Mother Joseph in Statuary Hall in the United States Capitol in Washington, DC.

Yet, in Vancouver, WA, her grave is simply marked in the same fashion as the other nuns of her religious community.

Statues of individuals have the ability to enshrine; cemetery monuments and memorials have the obligation to communicate desired participation in the Communion of Saints, washed in the blood of the Lamb, and destined for eternal life.

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At left is one of many shrine-like memorials honoring a Russian composer. It is located in the Tikhvinskoye Cemetery visited by Joe Sankovich during his visit. The cemetery is adjacent to Alexander Nevsky Monastery in St. Petersburg, Russia.


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