

Keynote Address

"FULFILLING OUR CONTEMPORARY MISSION AS CATHOLIC CEMETERIES/ CEMETERIANS"

by
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Esteemed Members and Guests of the National Catholic Cemetery Conference:

I want to thank the Program and Administrative Committees of the Conference for the invitation to share some thoughts with you at the beginning of this convention. We are gathered together to explore questions of our current situation in the Church and world and to formulate a vision for the future of Catholic cemeteries.

I would certainly be remiss if I did not acknowledge the diversity of the group that is gathered here today. We come from many different regions of the United States and Canada. We work in Archdioceses, Dioceses, Parishes; we are clergy, religious, laity; we are men and women, young and old, with a variety of gifts, talents, and experiences. We are directors, superintendents, counselors. We experience the Church and the Catholic Cemetery in ways vastly different from each other. My challenge as I come before you is in some way to acknowledge the diversity in our unity, as well as to uncover the unity in our diversity.

Twenty years have passed since the move away from legislated usage of Catholic cemeteries. Today's church population is bombarded on all sides with questions that are far removed from issues of burial in Catholic cemeteries. But the common denominator, the reality of death, continues to be present in our world, in our lives, and certainly in the lives of the families that we serve.

The certainty of the Resurrection of Jesus Christ is a factor that binds us together. The hope that one day we too will share in the Eternal Life promised by His Resurrection is what makes life for us not only bearable, but exciting, and the work that we do not so much a burden but a ministry. For underpinning every action that we take, every discussion in which we engage, must be the fundamental commitment to hold out the reality of that Resurrected Life of Jesus Christ as a Hope and Promise to each and every one we meet, whether in pre-need, at-need, or post-need situations, whether in the office or on the grounds of our cemeteries, in the homes or the parish churches of the families we serve or seek to serve.

At this point in time, with questions prompted *internally* by the evolution of new theology and prompted *externally* by the pressures of pre-need sales by non-sectarian cemeteries

and the contention that all cemeteries are religious in nature, it is imperative that we look at the unique role of the Catholic Cemetery in today's Church and world.

My attempt this morning to address questions of the present and future of Catholic cemeteries comprises four steps:

First, I think it is important to review some of the tremendous changes that have occurred in our society and in our Church in the past 20 years.

Second, I will like to comment, from my perspective, on the impact these changes have had on our lives and work as Catholic cemeterians.

Third, I want to propose the components of organizational administration as a method for constructing our response to these changes.

Fourth, I will allude to some further questions raised by a mission approach: the need for a *history, theology, structure* and *vocabulary* for Catholic cemeteries.

CHANGES IN SOCIETY AND CHURCH

It comes as no surprise to anyone to hear that life in our Church and society is considerably different now than it was 20 years ago. Of the many changes that have occurred, I want to identify a few which have particular significance for us as they pertain to the elderly, middle-aged and today's youth. As I highlight just some of the many changes, you might ask yourself how these trends have had an impact on your cemetery and the way you seek to serve your clientele.

One need only look around to note the longer-living, longer-working, more active community of elderly. There is a significant increase in the level of sophistication, education and independence of many who claim the title of 'senior citizen'. Retirement communities, marriages after widowhood, nursing homes, and a decline in the numbers of those elderly living with their adult children and grandchildren are common today. Many elderly are living in locations far from their original homes and from their children. And, while life may be richer in many ways than ever before for this age group, we also must recognize that suicide among the elderly is a growing phenomenon.

For today's middle-aged, we see new configurations of

family, especially the growing numbers of two-income households with commitments and expenses dependent upon both salaries. With the reality of divorce confronting one out of two families in the United States today, we also see an increasing number of single working parents. This age group has fewer children than previous generations and is far more mobile, oftentimes sinking roots in an area only until the next promotion. Paradox is rife in this generation. While on the one hand we see a materialistic, pleasure-oriented individual, we also have a population influenced by the Viet Nam veteran who is death-conscious and finds great value in memorialization of the dead. We contrast the growing polarization of liberal and conservative, rich and poor, with the success of efforts such as "Feed the World" and "Farm Aid". And this generation's experience with relation to immigrant populations is vastly different than 20 years ago. Large emigrations from the Middle and Far East and from Latin America bring new issues of language, acculturation and particularly experience of Catholicism and expectations of the Church.

Still in the secular arena, we must also look at today's youth and the environment in which they live. For many there is a much wider world view, more opportunity for participation in diverse cultural experiences. Today's youth are perhaps more practical than philosophical in approach. They are more inclined to be action rather than concept-oriented and find lesser significance in symbolic values. I am concerned, however, that there is little real sense of, or appreciation for *history*, and more emphasis on *materialism*.

This is a group with a longer commitment to schooling, a longer wait for marriage, a real sense of ability to control numbers and spacing of children. And yet in this group we see increasing numbers of runaways, street kids, latchkey children who are drug abusers, children with active sexual lives and experience with abortion. Regrettably, one of the results of all of this is that suicide among today's teen group occurs at an alarming rate of 6,000 a year.

CHURCH

When we turn our attention to the Church, we note that forty-three years ago, Pope Pius XII promulgated "Divino Afflante Spiritu" from which many church historians trace the seeming revolution that has occurred in the Roman Catholic Church. That document laid the foundation for Roman Catholic participation in Biblical criticism as a legitimate theological pursuit. From that foundation came many changes: the ecumenical Council Vatican II, a number of subsequent world synods of bishops, changes in the rites by which the Church celebrates its Sacraments, National Episcopal Conferences and supporting Secretariats, a Revised Code of Canon Law and a sense that the Roman Catholic Church is a dynamic and not a static reality in today's world. Integral to all these changes is a fundamental shift in vocabulary: from John XXIII's 'aggiornamento' we have moved forward to a focus on the Kingdom, Eucharistic and community-oriented, consensus-building Church in the modern world. We must address these changes and their impact on the Church universal and national, the Church at the diocesan or Archdiocesan level, the Church at the parish level, and the Church as it exists for those who are no longer active in membership.

At the universal level, along with the introduction of the New Rites for the celebration of the Sacraments, we also see the Revised Code of Canon Law. We see a highly visible pope, traveling, faced with tensions in the areas of the poor, politics, women, marriage, family life, sexual ethics, peace, secularism, ecumenism, liberation theology, and a host of personnel issues.

At the national level, we see episcopal groups struggling to confront issues of economics, education, nuclear power,

priest shortages, communication issues, in short the translation of world issues to the local reality and incorporating issues of national concern into the framework of the Roman Catholic tradition.

On the diocesan level, we see an even more diverse application of our Catholic tradition. We can see a variety of approaches to structures, personnel, time and material commitments. In many dioceses we experience the reality of Pastoral and Presbyteral Councils; we are familiar with local synods and speak-up sessions; we are confronted with a new decision-making process that looks toward consultation and consensus, involving clergy, religious, and laity. We are seeing fundamental changes in sacramental celebrations, increased attention to the needs of the poor and Catholic charities, increased demands on contributed funds, commitments to communications and mass media, tremendous demands placed upon marriage tribunals, the experience of new immigrants and a commitment to help settle them within our community and religious tradition, the introduction of a variety of new programs such as RENEW and sacrificial giving.

For reasons going far beyond the changes flowing from Vatican II, on the parish level, life too is different. There are fewer clergy remaining to staff parishes. We are familiar with the closing of parish schools and the growth of Religious Education Programs. There is a significant increase in a variety of parish-based lay ministries, from Eucharistic table-service to social programs. We see smaller communities and borderless parishes; we see a decline in the availability of traditional volunteers. With their long and polarized meetings, we know the meaning of consensus-seeking parish councils. We are aware of the tensions among liberal, pentecostal, Sunday-only, conservative and alienated Catholics. We know of the worship focus and struggles to make meaningful liturgy a priority in a parish while trying to pay high utility and insurance bills. We are not strangers to the time demands and budget constraints under which today's pastor, associate, deacon and pastoral team members all labor.

And yet, in the United States alone, we estimate that 15 million baptized into the Roman Catholic tradition are for all intents and purposes inactive. They live outside the Church for a variety of reasons, from a general upset with Vatican II changes in the Church, to marriage, divorce, birth control issues, to the personal wounds that they have suffered at the hands of clergy or fellow laity. A recent Gallup poll further indicates that 16% of these individuals state that religion is very important in their lives and a full 40%, that is six million people, have given serious thought to returning.

At best, this is a very sketchy overview of changes in the past 20 years, but it is clear that we live in a very different society and operate in a very different Church today.

CEMETERY IMPACT

What is the impact of all this turmoil on Catholic cemeteries? As one way of assessing the impact, let us consider for a moment the possibilities open to a Catholic family when a death occurs. That family might fall into the general classification of active and involved Catholics, the Sunday-only type, the high holiday/occasional type or the baptized who no longer frequent the Church, but perhaps have family space in one of our cemeteries. These are four general categories. And most likely there will be elements of all of these types in any one family. Add to that the possibility that they may elect to use the Catholic cemetery, use a non-sectarian cemetery, or use no cemetery at all and scatter cremated remains. These are three possibilities. When we multiply the four categories by the three possibilities, we have twelve different scenarios, only four of which, that is 33%, include some utilization of the Catholic cemetery.



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In our religious tradition, there are some core beliefs that follow from the Resurrection of Jesus. We have been a people of hope, a people who believed in vicarious suffering, who professed the communion of saints and found value in prayer for the dead. We saw the body as a Temple of the Holy Spirit and deserving of respect, even in death. I am afraid that in the twenty years, with the changes that I have called to mind, we are seeing a significant movement away from these beliefs. We are the witnesses to a level of pseudo-sophistication which sees little value in our burial tradition, including viewing, wake, Funeral Mass, Committal Service in a Catholic cemetery. The time-constrained, dollar-conscious, power and control-oriented contemporary often sees cremation as the answer, and perhaps a memorial service of some sort to follow as the appropriate manner in which to close a chapter called someone's life. And in increasing numbers, we are experiencing the delivery of cremated remains with no service having been celebrated or even planned.

Earlier this Spring, I chose a day at random to compile some statistics from the obituary column in a Seattle newspaper. There were 27 entries (and the funeral directors in the area tell me that there are usually many more which are not listed). Of these 27, 6, or 22%, indicated that there would be no service at all, and 10 gave notice of a memorial service to be held after burial or cremation. Where 20 years ago we might have expected the vast majority of deaths to be commemorated with a religious service and burial, only 41% of my random sample elected to go that route.

As an aside, I was intrigued to note a continuing interest in commemorating a death with an act of charity or a *mitzvah*: 18 of the 27 notices asked for memorial contributions to be made to a secular charity or religious organization.

Now, in addition to sociological factors are the changes in the Church which have an effect on Catholic cemeteries. Certainly the change in the language of the 1983 Revised Code has had an impact on cemeteries: we are now no longer blessed with a captive market and we must begin asking just what makes our cemeteries Catholic in character. With new and revised liturgical rites, and different principals conducting them, our involvement with clergy will only diminish, especially as numbers decline in ordained ministry.

TRANSITION

I hope you do not view all that has been said to this point as negative and overwhelming. It is an exciting time to be alive; it is wonderful to work in and for the Church and the People of God at this point in history. Never has the need for what we do been greater. We live with the afore-mentioned realities. We are also a people who can cope with them; we have done so in the past, and will in the future. We can do so precisely because of the fundamental reality of our identity: *We are a grassroots and a laypeople-initiated ministry. We embody the post-Vatican II Church.* So, given all that we face, we are not asking whether we can possibly survive, but how our continued survival will constitute ministry.

There can be no single answer to that question. I am certainly tempted to give you one, to outline my own personal vision. However, a basic characteristic of today's Church is its diversity. As I said at the beginning, those of us gathered here today are a microcosm of that Church and mirror its diversity. Our circumstances are different, as are our structures. Our percentages of Catholic families and their ethnic origins vary greatly.

Therefore, no single response to the issues posed by our changing society and Church will meet the needs of all of us. What I do want to propose is a method of constructing our responses which borrows from the new dynamics of decision-making apparent in the Church today. As opposed to a more

hierarchical approach to decision-making, we are seeing collaboration, consultation and consensus building as the norm. At the same time, our cemetery personnel are dealing with an increasingly complex array of services and relationships, and need to do so with a higher level of training and sophistication. A "goals and objectives" approach is becoming the norm in the administration of that complicated, sometimes unwieldy organization labeled the Catholic Cemetery.

An organizational administration approach to the questions before us is divided into two phases, *developmental* and *implementational*. In the developmental phase we deal with mission and structure questions. In the implementational we look to resource and power questions. What I would like to

to traditional burial services as opposed to contemporary memorial services? Does our liturgical tradition mandate graveside services? Can we offer services that are something less than consumer-oriented, that is, buildings and grounds that are not as well-manicured as some others because our tradition says it is more important to care for the living poor than the deceased rich? Are we compelled to put our financial resources less into groundskeeping and more into teaching children our Catholic values of death and burial and the place of Resurrection in our tradition? Have we addressed the question of cremation in the context of our religious heritage?

"No changing response to the issues posed by our changing society and Church will meet the needs of all of us."

do now by way of summary is to focus quickly on the elements of this decision-making dynamic.

THE EXPLANATION OF THIS ORGANIZATIONAL ADMINISTRATION APPROACH

In the *developmental* phase, we must devote much time and energy to an analysis of the contemporary trends briefly touched on in order to identify new needs. The work of burying the dead and comforting the mourning, as identified in the Creed of the National Catholic Cemetery Conference for Catholic cemeteries and further delineated in the recently-published *Guidelines for Funeral Rites in the Catholic Church*, are highlighted as the primary work that we do. Today, however, with so many alternatives open to people, there are new and different issues that we must face. These must feed into the delineation of a mission statement.

That mission statement has six components:

- 1) *Why do we exist?* What is our uniqueness, our symbolic or sign value? How do we fulfill our teaching function in the areas of human life, human dignity, issues and questions related to death and resurrection? Are we to be about comforting the grieving as well as serving as the historical treasure and identity for our community? How far beyond simple burial and care of grounds and buildings can, should or must we go?
- 2) *What are our roots?* In our ethnic traditions and fraternal organizations, we came into being more often than not as the "grass-roots" will of the faithful. We have lay roots as parish cemeteries before diocesan cemeteries. We have a heritage in the Judaic cemetery system and burial practice and might be asking what continues to make that Judaic cemetery tradition so strong today.
- 3) *What are our distinctive features?* The traditional upright monument which affirms that ours are cemeteries and not death-denying memorial park atmospheres, our statuary, our concept of consecrated ground, our offering of the Eucharist and graveside service as part of the Catholic cemetery, our ability to guarantee care based on the length and strength of our tradition—these features make us distinct.
- 4) *What type and quality of services are we committed to offering?* What do we offer the poor? Are we committed

- 5) *What is our future direction?* We can't continue to talk of satisfying the same needs—the services we offer will be contingent upon the changing needs of the people we serve. Shall we see pre-need as an evangelization program as much as a selling/counseling experience? Should we consider, as an interim solution, staffing for the priest shortage with individuals who could do committal services? Should we serve as resources to pastors and parishes in the formation of grief ministry or funeral support teams? Should we be looking at nursing home transportation services for the elderly on special holidays? Should we commemorate those clergy and religious buried in our cemeteries as a way to celebrate our historical role and encourage new vocations? Will we work with pastors in a ministry of healing at the time of death, focusing on those who have been alienated from the Church? Must we look to greater use of media in order to fulfill our teaching function?
- 6) *To whom will we offer our services?* To those who still come to us, or will we market ourselves to other audiences, particularly the alienated? Will we teach our children, ensuring that our tradition continues? Will we meet the special needs of the elderly? How can we meet the challenge of ministering to AIDS victims and their families? What role do we play in entering into the life/death/grief/pain realities of the families we serve? I have long struggled with the meaning of Jesus' statement, "Let the dead bury their dead," and feel that it has special significance in this day and age. In Jesus' time, the ritual of Jewish burial had become encrusted by rules and regulations and I think Jesus was saying "I'm not about rules and ritual, I'm about love. I'm in the business of pain, service and healing love." I think He was saying, "If you are hung up on your rules and regulations, to the exclusion of service and the denial of ministry, then you can remain behind, but I have other business, I see real people with genuine hurts that require My Healing Presence."

These same components of a mission statement need to be addressed for the NCCC as well:

- 1) *Why does NCCC exist?* Is it a resource for data-gathering, trend analysis, lobbying, theology?

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2) *What roots?* As we deal with new generations of cemetery personnel, it will be important to have a record of the genesis of NCCC as well as what has transpired in the intervening years and the new needs that must be met.

3) *What are the distinctive features of NCCC?* We need to face the fact that there is an American Cemetery Association, a Municipal Cemetery Association, a Cremation Association of North America, a National Association of Funeral Directors, an Order of the Golden Rule, a Western Cemetery Alliance and numerous state cemetery organizations. How do we relate to them, function alongside them, and communicate—to them and to the Catholic families we seem to be in competition for—communicate the history and tradition of Catholic burial in our countries?

4) *What type and quality of services should NCCC offer?* Does the NCCC have an obligation to assist in identifying what traditional Catholic burial practice is and how it can be provided economically? With a changing population of cemetery personnel, can the NCCC function as a personnel clearinghouse, especially in the area of pre-need counselors and superintendents and directors? Will NCCC take up the challenge and put flesh to some of the concepts put forth here to enable Catholic cemeteries to break out of traditional roles and constraints?

5) *What is our future direction?* Can the NCCC be an advertising and public relations resource for us as well as a publisher and a lobbyist with Bishops and Secretariats? Do we need to look at regionalization of NCCC as an issue?

Will NCCC assume responsibility for the research and communication of a theology of Catholic cemeteries in both scholarly and popular form?

6) *To whom will NCCC offer its services?* We can no longer look at the role of the NCCC as only responsive to parish and diocesan members. In order to serve Catholic burial needs in today's Church, someone has to assume responsibility for keeping the tradition alive and in front of the Church-going Catholic, the alienated Catholic and the whole host of new personnel now involved in parish ministry. Can this be done without NCCC involvement in religious and secular print and broadcast media? Those who have experienced a decline in utilization of their facilities require help far exceeding anything the NCCC has offered to date.

Whether for the diocesan or parish cemetery, or the National Catholic Cemetery Conference, once a mission statement is made, we complete the developmental phase by addressing questions of structure. While I would like to continue to discuss the implications of these questions for NCCC as well as cemeteries and cemetery personnel, time does not permit it. Suffice to say that these questions and the resource and power questions must be addressed for NCCC if it is to serve as an effective organization in today's Church.

For diocesan and parish cemeteries then, the structure questions address the framework within which we carry out our mission. We must look at how our cemeteries fit into our diocesan structures. Should we be reporting to a Bishop, a Business and Finance Office, a Pastoral Program Office or some combination of all of these? Out of that matter comes questions of how we accomplish our goals and collaborate with other diocesan agencies. Certainly we can see the necessity for involvement with the Worship Office in the planning and execution of mausolea and even for input into correct contemporary liturgical and teaching design for our cemeteries. There are social and charity concerns relating to our work, especially in the care of the poor and the provision for grief ministry support. We may be able to contribute to the ecumenical dialog, certainly have financial concerns, could well collaborate with diocesan planning and research for projection of burial needs, have ministry concerns with personnel whether clergy or laity, have public relations needs and must be present and visible in the area of both child and adult education if we are to promote the value of the Catholic cemetery tradition. And we must also address the question of the relationships of diocesan cemeteries to the parish cemeteries if we are to have a comprehensive approach to Catholic burial practice.

These areas of mission and structure in the development phase having been addressed, then we must move into the implementation phase. That too involves two components, the resource questions and the power questions. In the area of resources, we have to look to the variety of councils, commissions, offices, secretariats available on the diocesan level. We have to consider the possibilities of the National Conferences of Catholic Bishops and the various Secretariats that operate in the United States and Canada to support the work of the Church in these nations. We certainly must also include things like computers and data bases, print and broadcast media, parishes and pastors, and our own staffs.

In that area, when we look at our field and office personnel, do we see them mirroring the compassionate Jesus in their work? And as we face the imminent retirement of another generation of cemetery personnel who have viewed their work as ministry for so many years, how are we training their replacements in this same sense of ministry and dedication? When we look at Pre-Need Counselors, do we envision them only in a selling capacity, or do they have an evangelical dimension to their responsibilities, if only the ability to seek out and say to the alienated Catholic that the Church is still there for you?

Those who have superintendent responsibilities in our cemeteries, are they restricted to the property in their work or are they missionaries, teaching Christs, informing pastors and pastoral team members of the history, work, rationale for Catholic cemeteries? And those of us with the responsibilities of Diocesan or Archdiocesan Directors, both priests and laypersons, do we see ourselves as accountable only for the diocesan facilities or do we have a wider vision, the generous and supportive presence of Jesus in the work of parish cemeteries where perhaps the time and experience of the pastor charged with this additional burden is just not available. Do we see ourselves in schools, in media, in computers, in every and anything which will enable us to carry forward the mission of the Catholic cemetery?

And finally, the last component of the implementation phase is power. Who or what will move us to implement? Who makes the decisions? From all that we have said to this point, it is abundantly clear that much of the power for implementation is rooted in consultative and collaborative bodies. That means much more work than we may have experienced previously. We will need to be involved with not only our Archbishops and Bishops, but also with Pastoral and Presbyteral Councils. We will need to take the initiative to become involved in the variety of other commissions and councils which need our input. By such input will our cemeteries and Catholic burial tradition be not only protected, but promulgated and promoted.

HOW TO ACCOMPLISH ALL OF THAT?

These broad brushstrokes serve to outline a method by which we can delineate the mission of the Catholic Cemetery in the contemporary Church. It is a healthy serving to address all of this. I don't think we need to panic at having to digest all of this. Even someone as steeped in the organizational administration approach as I am doesn't yet have a mission statement. We're all in this together.

As we begin finally our task and move into the development and implementation phases, there are attendant issues which must also engage our creativity. I have time only to mention them here, and encourage you to explore them more thoroughly. First, we must consider the question of history. The Catholic cemetery tradition has a rich history. From our Judaic roots, through the Fossores of the early Church, to the period of the Reformation, to the Council of Trent, to the 1917 Code of Canon Law, to Vatican II, to the present are all distinct ears of the history of Catholic cemeteries. Not only is it important that we have that history in both scholarly and popular form, it is also important that we trace our own roots in our own countries. Are we pilgrim in origin? Are we colonial? Are we pioneer? And this too much be scholarly and popular in its compilation and presentation for public consumption. Certainly this will serve as a solid foundation for our tradition and underpin any educational and public relations work that we are mandated to do if we are to remain in this competitive marketplace.

Secondly, it is imperative that we have and publish a theology of Catholic cemeteries, a theology which recognizes the changes in vocabulary that have taken place. "Consecrated" is a word of the past. How many today can identify the "Spiritual and Corporal Works of Mercy?" How many relate to the "souls of the faithful departed" or, for that matter, "Sanctifying Grace?" With much of the language we once knew gone, with so radical a change in our circumstances, it is time for us to look at ourselves within the context of the contemporary Church and ask what our nature is and how we fit into concepts like Kingdom, Eucharistic Community, Evangelization, Pilgrim People; ask if there is a sacramental or symbolic value to our facilities, what part we play in the preservation

of the Catholic burial tradition, what role we have in a pluralistic society, how we relate to and have an impact on ecumenical efforts, in short, what part we play in the building up of the People of God.

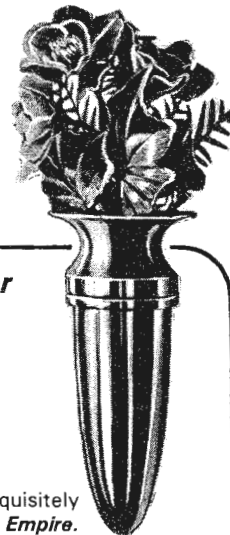
CONCLUSION

The changes occurring in Church and society are complex and far-reaching. And they shape our agenda for the future: to marshal our resources of people, facilities, organizational structures, history and theology in such a way that we serve contemporary individuals and families as ministers of a living Church. We will then be equipped to promulgate, announce, and celebrate who and what we are and take our rightful place in the post-Vatican II Church, collaborators also in the task of the building of the Kingdom of GOD.

For it is my conviction that the Jesus who read and struggled with the Suffering Servant Songs, invites us, not only today and during this convention, but also when we go home to ponder from Isaiah:

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me to bring good news to the suffering and the afflicted. He has sent me to comfort the brokenhearted, to announce liberty to captives, and to open the eyes of the blind. He has sent me to tell those who mourn that the time of GOD's favor to them has come, and the day of wrath to their enemies. To all those who mourn in Israel He will give: beauty for ashes, joy instead of mourning, praise instead of heaviness. For God has planted (both) them (and us) like strong and graceful oaks for His Own Glory."

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