

# Seeing the Light

by Joseph B. Sankovich

Thoughts on the  
Death of Elizabeth  
Kubler-Ross

***Dr. Elizabeth Kübler-Ross died  
August 24, 2004 at the age of 78.***

Elizabeth was born a triplet in 1926 in Zurich, Switzerland, weighing in at all of 2 pounds. Overcoming the obstacle of low birth weight, she grew to become a medical doctor, a wife, mother and grandmother, a medical doctor and psychiatrist, a teacher and author; in all these roles, Elizabeth was first a lover of people who were willing to share the deepest of their personal realities and thus risk the authenticity of fully experiencing the human condition.

She is known as a pioneer in the American hospice movement, an involvement that grew out of her personal research and reflections with terminal patients. Throughout her life, Elizabeth engaged all with whom she had contact because of her ability to gather information, organize, analyze in deep reflection and then translate her findings in a way that met us where we live and die. She wrote over 20 books on the topic of life, death and the transition between them, beginning in 1969 with her ground-breaker, *On Death & Dying*. In 1999 Time magazine named her as one of the 100 Most Important Thinkers of the past century.

I presume to think of Elizabeth as my friend. She is surely among the first 5 people I anticipate meeting in heaven! I did the week-long Life, Death, Transition workshop 27 years ago and followed it with another Kübler-Ross sponsored week of psychodrama workshops. For the next ten years our paths would occasionally cross in airports shops for coffee, at her lectures,

picking her up or taking her back to airports for flights to further engagements during which we would talk about all sorts of life/death issues and how our futures were unfolding.

## ELIZABETH'S TEACHING

She would always speak of her greatest life lesson coming from the carvings of butterflies all over the walls outside the gas chambers at Maidanek, one of the World War II concentration camps. Freedom by releasing the pool of repressed emotion provided her with seemingly untiring energy. Over the course of these many years since the late 1970s, I have been working to integrate Elizabeth's wisdom into my own understanding of the Catholic theology of resurrection, including concepts of transfiguration and transformation.

Often I heard Elizabeth say, "Those who learn to know death, rather than fear it, become our teachers about life." In addition she would remind us, "Dying is nothing to fear. It can be the most wonderful experience of your life. It all depends on how you have lived." The news releases about her last moments tell us that they were as she wanted, with those close to her, a room with a big window and lots of flowers .... the butterfly escaping the cocoon of the earthly body!

We are all familiar with Elizabeth's stages for the terminal patient, i.e. denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. Years of work have taught us that those who are engaged in the grief process do not necessarily experience these stages in order, do not complete one and then move on to another, do not have a set amount of time within

*"Those who learn to know death,  
rather than fear it, become  
our teachers about life."*

(continued  
on page 24)

## SEEING THE LIGHT (cont.)

which the movement to acceptance must take place.

### CATHOLIC CEMETERY OPPORTUNITIES

As I began this study, I was fortunate to have responsibility for a small parish cemetery which easily became a laboratory within which to search for ways to apply this knowledge to those who had recently buried loved ones. From that environment I learned how to support those coming to the cemetery to visit the graves of their beloved dead, whether grandparents, parents, spouses, children or friends.

**Two experiences stand out for me.** The first is the time spent with students in the parish Confirmation program as they came to the cemetery during the course of preparation for reception of the sacrament. Christian service was integrated into their program. They came to rake leaves, collect debris, plant flowers; during their time in the cemetery they observed committal services, asked questions, talked about life and death and what they as Catholics were called to believe about human dignity, life, death and resurrection.

The second is a later experience with one of those students whose father had died while he was a junior in high school. I found him one Saturday quietly sitting at

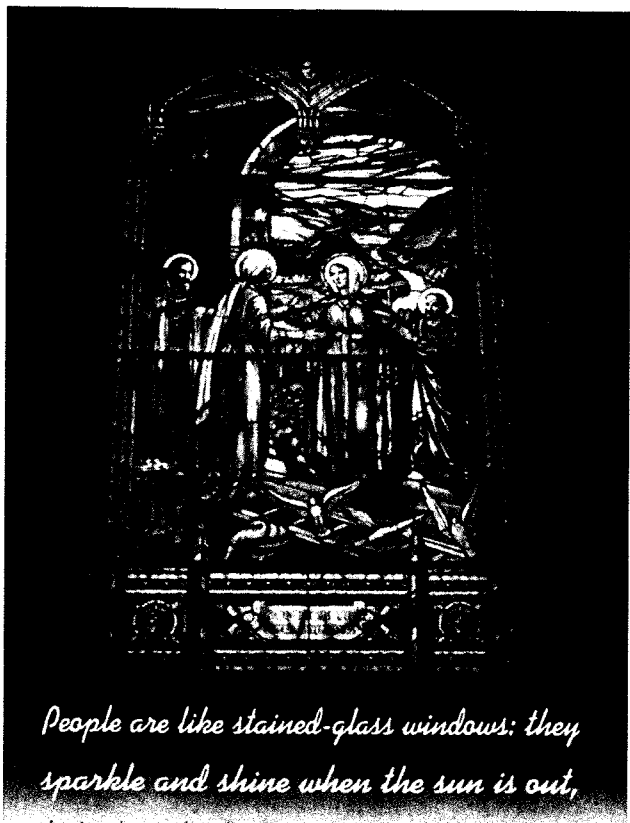
his dad's grave and we spoke. He shared that he had come there to talk with his dad about the decisions he would shortly be facing for his own life, college, career. He said that the cemetery was the perfect place for him to not only find comfort but also to connect in a special way with a father he knew loved him and continued to watch out for him as he was embarking into unknown territories. Enabling both these situations came as a direct result of the Kübler-Ross work I had been privileged to do.

To prepare to write this article, I reviewed a talk that I delivered in Milwaukee, Wisconsin at the National Catholic Cemetery Conference convention in 1979 - 25 years ago - on the role of parish cemeteries in grief/bereavement. The talk, entitled "Cemeteries Ministering to the Bereaved," was printed in The Catholic Cemetery magazine in February, 1980. In the talk, I explained that grief is the response to any loss or separation, real or imagined, actual or symbolic, of any emotionally significant person, object or situation which is perceived to be of an irredeemable or permanent nature; and that bereavement is a period in one's life following the death of a significant other.

Those who work in the Catholic cemetery environment are deeply immersed in the dynamics of grief and bereavement on a daily basis. These days those who are Catholic have an additional burden in being representatives/employees of the Catholic Church. In the first instance we have and can create multiple opportunities to integrate the grief and bereavement dynamics of Elizabeth Kübler-Ross with the Church's teachings about life after death, supporting families and friends through the bereavement process as they come to the cemetery to visit and pray.

With personal visits, workshops, printed materials, special events, we can support the progressive steps to grief-resolution, i.e. separation, confrontation, expression, reorganization. A current and major challenge is finding ways to do this with young parents who have experienced the death of a child, whether fetus, stillborn or infant.

For those employees who are Catholic, there is an additional contemporary challenge, the scandal of sexual abuse. Under this umbrella, there are also the dynamics of grief and bereavement. There are the losses of innocence and dignity suffered by those who were abused. There are the losses of clerical identity and reputation for those who have been accused and removed from ministry. I suspect that a significant number of these priests are buried in Catholic cemeteries. There may be some future possible involvement of the Church's cemetery ministry in the counsel and support of those who have been harmed once programs of healing can be fashioned and implemented.



*People are like stained-glass windows; they sparkle and shine when the sun is out, but when the darkness sets in, their beauty is revealed only if there is light within.*

*... Elizabeth Kubler-Ross*

## CONNECTING CATHOLIC CEMETERY / EUCHARIST

One of the most important and available opportunities for those who work within or make use of Catholic cemeteries is the Eucharistic sacrament and an understanding of the shared dynamic with the bereavement process. With the promulgation of Sacrosanctum Concilium, The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, our understanding of the Sacrifice of the Mass has been expanded to include the concept of the community coming together to celebrate the Eucharist.

Eucharist at its root means 'to give thanks.' The completion of a healthy bereavement process should end in the ability to give thanks for the life of the individual who is being mourned. In the eucharistic celebration there are two distinct elements, memory and thanksgiving.

The Gloria, the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures with the intervening responsorial psalm, and the proclamation of the Gospel are elements of the memory portion of our celebration which are used to awaken in us the great acts of God on our behalf. Awakening all of the history of involvement with our beloved dead while visiting at the grave is the same sort of memory experience. As we listen to the Scriptures we know that all of the actions of God's people were not in accord with God's desire or intention. It is surely the same in the life we have shared with those we have buried in our cemeteries.

Consequently, we return to the structure of the Eucharist. Prior to being able to move on to thanksgiving, the great Eucharistic Prayer, we have the opportunity to experience the Penitential Rite. Perhaps it could be placed differently, i.e. following the memory part and before the thanksgiving part. For we are called upon to remember, and in remembering we find those things that we did, we failed to do, those things done to us or not done to us

*(continued  
on page 26)*

## MEMORIUM ART COLLECTION

Bronze crafted by artists into objects of beauty  
that will exist for an eternity.

### The art of the eternal

Our collection of bronze family urns is unique  
in North America; works of art created to provide  
dignity and peace of mind to generations,  
now and down the years.



## SEEING THE LIGHT (cont.)

which require forgiveness. The same dynamic is present in bereavement.

There are actions and omissions that require forgiveness; hopefully this has been accomplished prior to a death. Oftentimes, however, it has not. Even more frequently, residue remains and requires constant repetition and reassurance.

With memory and forgiveness operative, never fully explored or complete, we try to move on to thanksgiving. The Eucharistic Prayer of Thanksgiving is the acknowledgment we make in prayer of what Jesus' life, death and Resurrection have accomplished on our behalf. We are called upon to pray the Eucharist at least weekly and many gather to celebrate on a daily basis. The same dynamics are operative with the bereaved as they come to the cemetery to continue with their journey toward healing in

finally being able to say thank you to the deceased for life, love, friendship, support, encouragement. And yet, because we and our beloved dead share the human condition, none of it has been perfect!

But is this not the role of the Catholic cemetery in mirroring the celebration of the Eucharist so as to assist our fellow pilgrims on the journey to building God's kingdom until such time that Jesus comes again to claim it as the work of redemption accomplished and able to be presented to the Father?

### LASTING CONTRIBUTIONS

Among the lasting contributions of Dr. Elizabeth Kübler-Ross might be included:

☞ that we know that death is not only an event but a process and we can give or be given the gift of preparation for/experience of healthy death.

☞ that we also now know that grief is also a process and has applications not only to the experience of death. The grieving process can help us understand all of life's losses and be better equipped to grow through them.

☞ that the stages of grief impact the manner in which we deal with the continuation of life's challenges and provide a platform upon which to engage in the healing process.

☞ that hospice care is a wonderful ministerial opportunity within which to experience or support those who are on the final stages of their journey from this life to the next.

☞ that we have a powerful launchpad for our own church's work in the areas of death, grief, bereavement, hospital, hospice, social services, cemetery, sexual abuse and priest healing.

In numerous workshops with clergy and laity who have parish cemetery responsibility I have had the opportunity to explore the remembrance/thanksgiving dynamic of Eucharist as it applies to Catholic cemeteries. I have found a very receptive audience, especially among the clergy, who have spoken of the need to integrate this concept in their celebration of funeral liturgies as well as their promotion of parish cemeteries as integral to parish life and ministry.

I am grateful for the opportunity to accept the occasion of the death of Elizabeth Kübler-Ross as a time to reflect on the contributions she has made to our better understanding of these dynamics so that we can better meet the needs of those we serve. ■

Joe Sankovich is an NCCC supplier-member and a contributing writer to the *Catholic Cemetery* magazine. This article is the 2nd in a series he has written about people whose life contributions have had a widespread and lasting impact on others.

## MausoGuard™



The Mausoguard provides a complete casket enclosure, utilizing a rigid lower tray. The finished installed enclosure, assures confidence and general welfare within the Mausoleum ensuring protection against odor transmissions, potential leakage and insect intrusion.

The upper section of the enclosure is constructed of a seven layer, co-extruded plastic film that is FDA approved, and has an extremely high barrier to gas emissions.

The lower section, formed out of a high-molecular weight polyethylene, features

the Diamond-Rail base, ensuring strength and rigidity to the whole enclosure. The incorporation of the Uni-Roll edge, and locking rail, completes the enclosure, maintaining the integrity of the assembly, giving protection and ease of handling during the entombment process.

The assembly of the Mausoguard system is easily accomplished in minutes, by one person.

**Cut your costs by buying directly from the manufacturer.**

**Call 800-886-2417 for more information and pricing.**

2715 Badger Rd, Lakeland FL 33811  
(863)647 9337 • FAX: (863)647 9545



Patent Pending  
TM of VKM International Inc.