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The time between the Convention of the National Catholic Cemetery Conference and the Spring of the year, when articles from members of the Parish Cemetery Committee are due, is a time of reflection and integration for me. I wrestle with a variety of topics which might be of interest to fellow directors of parish cemeteries; I ask questions and trade comments with a variety of pastors who have parish cemeteries and I continue to find verified my belief that when interest in the parish cemetery is high, it is very high, but when it is low, such interest is perceived as the "onus mundi"!

As a consequence, in facing this year's topic I have decided to share something of a collaborative effort, first describing the program initiated and then the positive outcomes of such a program.

Anyone on the frontlines, the grassroots of parish life, knows the reality of the difficulties associated

with finding volunteer help. What used to be a fashionable way to invest oneself in rewarding activity and generosity of spirit is no longer the case in American life with the economy and family life that we know. Parishes all over the country know the effects of two-adult incomes as almost a necessity for survival in the 1980's. With the experience of Evangelization, we are also coming into closer contact with those families who have for one reason or another abandoned the practice of Catholicism. From my own pastoral experience as a Director of Parish Education Programs, quite a number of these families have stopped the practice of their religion because of a divorce and a situation where now the single parent with children has joined the work force and is attempting to hold together some semblance of family life and home while perhaps being in the marketplace for the first time in a number of years. The

emotional overload is particularly obvious, and as adjustments are made, perhaps the ability to return to the practice of religion will be once again seen as a necessity. That has been, happily, our experience.

The issue, however, is what this phenomenon has done to the pool of available volunteers. In recruiting for teachers for the parish education program I have difficulty; in recruiting for ongoing volunteers for the parish cemetery, I have also experienced the same difficulty. Those who were once available are no longer available; those who are available are called upon in so many different areas that they no longer have the time or emotional stamina to respond on a regular basis as they once did.

It was partly out of a realization of these realities that a new program was fashioned at Sacred Heart Parish, the parent parish of Mount Kelly Cemetery. The Director of Religious Education and I conversed

at length about Confirmation as a proper time for the combination of Christian Service experience (read volunteer project experience) in conjunction with death education as a part of the entire Confirmation Program. It certainly seems appropriate that one who is taking the step of affirming maturity in Faith, with a willingness to accept the responsibilities attendant to the practice of this Catholic Faith, has a responsibility to confront the issues of life and death, the reality of this life coming to an end with the subsequent review/evaluation of how well one has taken the gifts/talents with which he/she has been blessed and used them for the building up of the Kingdom of God. With these thoughts in mind, Mount Kelly Cemetery was included in the list of possible Christian Service Projects for the Sacred Heart Confirmation Class 1981.

Happily, a group of seven young men (Grades Seven and Eight) responded to the description of activities possible and times available for this effort. Students were committed to a minimum of one hour a week during the course of the eight months of preparation, beginning in October of 1980. We used Saturday mornings, 9:30 AM to 11:30 AM and that gave us double the amount of time that each student was required to commit and twenty-seven weeks of volunteer help. **A rough calculation determines that we received approximately 285 hours of volunteer help!**

In terms of the quality of hours contributed, that is most significant to anyone who operates a volunteer program! In terms of observable growth, and the potential for wholesome work experience and education, the benefits were well beyond the hours consumed.

First, however, the work itself requires comment: What could Seventh and Eighth Grade students accomplish? How much could they hope to accomplish over the course of the Winter months? Fortunately, in Michigan where the optimist says, "Spend twenty-four hours here and you are sure to see some extreme change in the weather," we were blessed with a very late Fall. That allowed for a tremendous amount

of time in October, November and early December to be devoted to raking leaves, grave repair, flowerbed preparation for the Winter. Almost every Saturday during those months was spent outdoors. What we discovered in working with these young men was not to have terribly high expectations for productivity. We adjusted these downward, but compensated with the rewarding experience of being able to teach young men valuable skills which they will be able to carry forward into either a work situation or in the future maintenance of their own homes. Nothing was done without explanation; nothing was done without listening for feedback. What we determined as a most valuable side benefit is that these youngsters frequently did not have the advantage of working closely along side of their own fathers and learning from that experience. (Personally, it awoke in me memories of my own childhood, while growing up in a large family where everyone had his/her own chores and Dad was so busy earning a living and handling those things which only he could handle that the comment "Here, let me do it" was frequently heard because of the expediency of time and sharing in the working experience at that time was not a possibility. With that awareness, I personally felt that it was important for me to provide some of that wholesome teaching/learning for these youngsters.) In the deep Winter months a change of pace was in order.

To vary the experience, we would alternate between meeting at the Cemetery (where there was always snow to shovel or ice or clear) and meeting at the Rectory where the experience was twofold: office-type work and conversations concerning the history of the cemetery, the rationale for the Church being involved in the burial of the dead, the theology of death, judgment, Resurrection, Heaven. Students were able to sort through and organize files that I have been meaning to get to for quite a number of years and ask all kinds of questions about what they were finding.

Finally, with the advent of Spring

and the clean-up that comes with this time of year, we were back outside on the Cemetery grounds on a regular basis. And happily, in a cemetery where only thirty burials take place in a year, a burial was scheduled for a Saturday morning.

In conjunction with this burial I knew that we had done something right, something good in the sight of God and His Church. I asked the students on the morning of the burial if they would like to observe all that happens from the working side of the Cemetery in conjunction with a burial. To that point I suppose that, except for the presence of monuments, their outside work really was just like working in a park. The burial made the difference and brought to reality the awareness of death, dying, burial, cemetery.

Mount Kelly is a cemetery which provides only graveside services (the rationale for this could be the topic for another entire article), and after the students joined the family in prayer for the deceased this particular morning, they remained at the grave after the family departed. At that time, the questions began and continued non-stop for the next half hour. They varied from the weight of the vault, the rationale for the vault, the depth of the grave, the mechanics of the lowering device, the disposal of the surplus soil, prices, grave marking, decomposition of the remains. In the context of "the pornography of death", this was an extremely healthy situation in which to demythologize the death experience, create a healthy awareness of the Church's teaching on death and life after death, instill a healthy respect for the Catholic Cemetery as the place where God's People, Redeemed in Christ Jesus, together await His Final Coming. To complete the task of the burial, following the questions (while the tent and lowering device were being disassembled), the students participated in the refilling of the grave. The conversations following that experience revealed that the students had truly had an educational experience, a real assimilation of new information and integration of that information into the emotional network of their various lives.

In the operation of a small parish cemetery, approximately a thousand dollars worth of free labor is a meaningful contribution. If that were all to be considered in this project, perhaps we could say that we operated a successful experiment. The productivity, however, came to be viewed only as a side benefit. The teaching/learning experience, the growth in Faith and understanding became the valuable benefits in the program. The benefits to the students certainly must be viewed as seeds sown. Perhaps some of them will have to make decisions about burial places for their loved ones and they will happily recall their Saturdays in Mount Kelly and remember our talks about this community who await resurrection together and they will choose a Catholic rather than

a non-sectarian cemetery because of that knowledge; perhaps later in their high school years, they will be with other students and be tempted to vandalism of either our parish cemetery or some other one and they will recall our work and discussions and be able to persuade their friends to pass by that experience out of the respect they have based on the knowledge and experience they gained at Mount Kelly; perhaps some one of them will be in a parish as an adult where a parish cemetery exists and as a member of a parish council, will take pains to make of that cemetery a place of love, respect, devotion; perhaps one among them will see as honorable a career as a Catholic Cemetery Director, aware of the nature of the ministry that is performed in conjunction with the

Catholic burial of the dead; and perhaps, even, one of them may accept the call to the Priesthood, and out of that experience, bring a new vision to the possibilities inherent in a parish cemetery, begin by upgrading the care and interest in the cemetery, and then make it a real part of the parish life by also using it as a teaching theatre for the young people of the parish. Perhaps . . .

I listened a few weeks ago to a priest with a parish cemetery say that the Church has no reason to be in the cemetery business and he certainly wasn't going to encourage it by doing anything with his cemetery. I balance his lack of vision and pessimism with the reality and joy of my own experience and continue to believe that there is hope for the future.

## "COUNSELOR'S CORNER"

I sometimes marvel at God's wisdom in limiting our days on earth. Whatever the length of my allotted time here I am quite sure it will be adequate because as I become more mature it becomes more difficult to adjust and accept the major social and technical changes taking place around us. As the saying goes, "The spirit is willing but the flesh is weak."

In the Catholic cemeteries we do not have the opportunity to experience changes in the basic services we offer. We have been making burials and entombments for a good many years. True, there have been some major changes in the way we do business, how we handle our burial and accounting records, how we make excavations and how we perform our maintenance duties all brought about by technological advancements.

But now comes a new basic service with which we are not all familiar and in which we will all become involved in more and more in the near future. I'm referring to cremation and the increase which is taking place. If your area of the country has not yet experienced this phenomena, get ready because it's coming.

The most recent records I've seen indicate that the largest increases and the most prevalent use of this method of disposal has been in the Pacific coast areas and particularly in the metropolitan areas of Los Angeles, San Francisco, Portland, Seattle and Vancouver, British Columbia where cremation rates are now near or over 50%. That it has spread to adjacent areas and will continue to spread east, there is little doubt. Here in Spokane (300 miles inland) where five years ago the rate was below 10%, it has now grown to over 25% and continues to increase. Catholic cremation here has increased from nearly nothing to over 8% in the same period of time. All indications point to further increases. The effect of this increase locally has been the closure of two funeral homes and the remaining five now all have crematories.

Whatever the reason for this change, whether it is a desire for more simplified disposal, lower cost arrangements or activities of the memorial societies, it is something we must all learn to deal with and provide the necessary facilities. It also means that we must be prepared to discuss these arrangements with our families with a reasonable amount of expertise. We must be able to answer such questions as what does it cost; who does it; is the funeral service still necessary; do we need a casket; does the church really allow this; and what do we do with the remains.

These and many, many other questions our Catholic families are going to be asking. If these questions are not answered they will be looking around to see how other families are handling it. If we as Catholic cemeterians are not prepared to counsel with our families they will likely go where they can get the answers, right, wrong or indifferent.

The point of all this is to state that cremation is here, it's growing, spreading and it's going to stay. We must somehow let the parishioners know that we are prepared for this but at the same time not appear to be promoting cremation over other types of disposal. If we are not prepared we will be doing a disservice to our parishioners and to our jobs as cemeterians.

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