

CELEBRATING ARCHBISHOP RAYMOND HUNTHAUSEN'S  
CONTRIBUTION  
TO THE CATHOLIC CEMETERY APOSTOLATE

Sunday, August 21, 2016 was Archbishop Raymond Hunthausen's 95<sup>th</sup> birthday; he served as the 6<sup>th</sup> Ordinary of the Archdiocese of Seattle from 1975, retired in 1991, and is the only living episcopal participant in the Second Vatican Council, attending as the very recently consecrated Bishop of Helena, Montana. The episcopal consecration oils were barely dry when Bishop Hunthausen was on his way to Rome for the first session of the Council which would last until 1966.

I was privileged to work in the Archdiocese of Seattle as Director of Cemeteries from 1985 to 1991. In another article I recounted my first extended meeting with Archbishop Hunthausen when he said that my unpacking might be premature. He had been provided my background and experience in Catholic cemeteries in the search/hiring process, had followed the canonical research to make sure that the rescript that was issued after my resignation from active priesthood would allow me to hold such a position of (arch)diocesan leadership, and was the final authority who extended the offer of employment.

In the United States, prior to the Second Vatican Council, the bishops were loosely organized into what was known at the time as the National Catholic Welfare Conference (NCWC). Those of us old enough to remember this organization also recall that the acronym was also loosely translated into "Nothing counts west of Chicago." The NCWC, subsequent to the end of the Second Vatican Council, evolved into the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, the USCCB — with 3½ pages (about 5 point type) in the PJ Kenedy *Official Catholic Directory* taken to describe the various structures, officers, committees and task forces with current membership.

Pertaining to Catholic cemeteries, something very significant occurred west of Chicago under the tenure of Raymond J. Hunthausen, Archbishop of Seattle. And I take this opportunity once again, on the Archbishop's 95<sup>th</sup> birthday, to tell the story of how Archbishop Hunthausen became the promulgator and promoter of the first Mission Statement for Catholic cemeteries in the post-Vatican II church.

On the occasion of that first meeting with Archbishop Hunthausen I knew very little about him or the Archdiocese of Seattle. I was unaware of his thinking about nuclear arms, the Trident missile base located in the Puget Sound area, his withholding of half his federal income taxes to protest the nuclear arms race, his work with the poor, the immigrant, his welcome to the Seattle gay community, opening the cathedral to Dignity, the first Catholic gay organization. I didn't know his mind on a host of contemporary issues that crossed his desk as a Vatican II archbishop, but that adage, "fools rush in where angels fear to tread" must have underpinned my belief in what good could come from an effective Catholic cemetery program at the (arch)diocesan level.

Quite simply, that was the frame of reference. I had received help from the archdiocesan chief financial officer in assessing the current reality of Seattle's three archdiocesan cemeteries and had prepared a 25-page report that was submitted in advance of our appointment. The Archbishop began by complimenting me on the thoroughness of the report and then went off in a totally unexpected direction. He started talking about ecumenism, the environment, limited land resources within the Seattle city limits and brought those threads together by saying that he had been thinking about the church's involvement in 'the cemetery business', wondering out loud if that was the best possible use of time and treasure in a post-Vatican environment. He buttressed that statement by indicating that in the Pacific Northwest, with Catholics being less than 10% of the general population, use of special cemeteries for Catholics might be ecumenically divisive.

He spoke at length about Calvary Cemetery which overlooks the University of Washington and occupies 40 acres of prime real estate; he wondered if that was the best and most productive use of the land; he even expressed a thought that perhaps the stones could be removed, the walls strengthened and in-filled with another several feet of soil, and the space made to accommodate another full compliment of interments. We spoke about embalming fluid, possible water table contamination, and the European Catholic and general practice of renting a grave space for a designated period of time, then once the time had lapsed, opening the space, removing the bones and placing them in an ossuary away from the original interment site.

This was how the meeting began! All the while I'm thinking, "What have I gotten myself into?" "Where is leading to?" "Should I sell my new condo now and look elsewhere to share my beliefs about the worth of Catholic cemeteries and how they might contribute to the evolution and growth of this new Catholic church.

What came next was a complete surprise, but the Archbishop was full of surprises during my tenure in Seattle! After sharing all those thoughts, he indicated that he was, however, open to seeing if there was something new and different that ought to be considered. To this end, he was quite generous; he made contact with several of his trusted priest confidants from around the Pacific Northwest and created with and for me a committee to study the theological implications of Catholic cemeteries in this new era of the Catholic church.

And how interesting and prophetic that decision would be; the only other treatise on Catholic cemeteries was a dissertation titled *The Blessing of Cemeteries*, written by Rev. Cornelius M. Powers, a priest of the Archdiocese of Seattle, in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Canon Law in 1944. Powers went on to be appointed Archbishop of Portland in Oregon where he served from 1974 to 1986.

The committee met a number of times over several months; a great deal of time was devoted to the issue of whether Catholic cemeteries should continue to have a place in the post-Vatican II Catholic church. In the end, we met for several all-day sessions in which we crafted the first mission statement for Catholic cemeteries in the United States, a statement which shifted the Catholic cemetery paradigm away from discipline and guilt to ministerial service.

Once completed, the statement was presented to Archbishop Hunthausen for review; he was quite complimentary on the theology and the structure and indicated that he was willing to grow into a new position and not only promulgate the statement within the Archdiocese of Seattle, but also (with a little prodding) share the mission statement to his brother (arch)bishops throughout the United States. He did so with his customary generosity, indicating that there was no copyright on the document and that, if they so desired, the other 150+ Ordinaries could feel free to copy, modify, make use of the Seattle Archdiocesan work in any way that might support and encourage Catholic cemetery ministerial service for the good of the church and those involved in this apostolate. More than 60 wrote back to him, thanking him for the document, indicating that they intended to put it to use in their own (arch)dioceses.

Over the course of the six years, and then even beyond that time, I came to know Archbishop Hunthausen better. I had no problem inviting him to Calvary on Holy Thursday each year to walk the priests' section of the cemetery, to remember his collaborators in ministry, and to pray for them as their pastor and shepherd.

I recall the Archbishop's telephone call asking for a few hands to help him out on a Saturday morning. It seemed that one of Seattle's more famous street people, George Kotalaris, was about to be evicted from his apartment and the Archbishop was concerned that George would end up on the streets or at the Cathedral rectory doorstep! He had convinced George to vacate the small apartment and allow the Archbishop to lead a cleaning party into the nightmare. I was successful in recruiting from the cemetery staff 'a few good men' and they showed up to undertake what turned out to be a mammoth task. There was a large picture of George, however, grinning ear to ear in the following Sunday's newspaper, telling the story of how he was successful in getting Archbishop Hunthausen to clean his toilet! When I asked the Archbishop about the story, he simply said, "That's George!" An aside: I think this is what Pope Francis has in mind when he talks about acquiring the smell of the sheep!

I recall his visiting me in the hospital when I was about to have back surgery, telling me that he had endured the same surgery, that there was nothing to it, and that I would be fine. I recall the meetings taking place around the canonical visitation, my contact with Cardinal Dearden, retired Archbishop of Detroit, asking his help in resolving the Hunthausen problem in Seattle, the response from Cardinal Dearden, one of the originators of the USCCB, indicating that he really didn't know Archbishop Hunthausen as the Archbishop hadn't been involved in any of the national committees, but that he would certainly do what he could to be of assistance as he was convinced of the perils associated with the Vatican's investigation.

While interim director of cemeteries in the Diocese of Saginaw, Michigan (1992 - 1997) Bishop Ken Untener was successful in convincing Archbishop Hunthausen to come out of retirement to speak to religious educators in the Saginaw Diocese. As he had another commitment, Bishop Untener asked if I would pick up Archbishop Hunthausen at the airport and bring him into the city. During that ride we had a chance to catch up; the Archbishop was nervous about his upcoming presentation; he wasn't sure why he had allowed Bishop Untener to talk him into this

trip and presentation. Of course, stories told later indicated that Archbishop Hunthausen, whose topic was the Rite of Reconciliation, could not have been better.

I know and remember Archbishop Raymond Hunthausen as quiet, unassuming, visionary, holy, down to earth, plain spoken, in love with the church, his priests, his chancery staff, and the wonderful people of the Archdiocese of Seattle.

I've asked that the entire Mission Statement be reprinted as this has never been done. It was first promulgated in 1987-88 and I've introduced it in every one of the 40+ (arch)dioceses in which I have worked since that time.

Joseph B. Sankovich

## MISSION STATEMENT

### VISION

Our experiences of birth and personal development as we journey through life's important events are part of a great voyage. Our faith has significant influence on how we experience this journey. We don't travel alone, we are part of a believing community; this community supports us and marks important moments in our lives with prayer and ritual.

Death is not the end of the journey, but a beginning. Death and life are of the same cloth. During the funeral liturgy we say "Lord, for your faithful people life is changed, not ended." Faith helps us to see death as another event of our journey that is celebrated by a believing community. The Catholic cemetery is part of this ritual.

We have our own cemeteries because our perception of death is guided by our resurrection faith. Catholic cemeteries of the ***Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Seattle*** exist to meet the needs of the faithful at the time of death and burial, and throughout bereavement. By setting aside a holy place for burial we provide a fitting environment for liturgical celebration. As in life, we believe the human body should be treated in death with respect and dignity. Our memories of the deceased are enlightened by a faith that sees death as a bridge to the communion of saints. Our bonds with the believing are not broken by death.

### HISTORY OF CATHOLIC CEMETERIES

Cemeteries are rooted in ancient religious rituals of reverence for the dead. Separate sacred spaces have always been set aside for burial. Influenced by Jewish tradition and the diversity of burial practices of Gentile converts, the early Christian church developed a burial tradition which retained reverence for the body and a sacred space for burial but also connected the death/resurrection of the believer with the death/resurrection of the Lord. That is why Eucharist, the remembrance and celebration of the death and resurrection of the Lord, has always been integral to the burial of Christians who "have died in the hope of rising again".

### SIGNIFICANCE OF CATHOLIC CEMETERIES

People entering a Catholic cemetery should see symbols of the church's teachings about life, death, and life after death. The cemeteries are part of our ritual space. People working or volunteering in cemeteries should provide a ministerial service.

The ***Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Seattle*** has cemeteries dating from the time of the first Catholic presence in Washington. All Catholic cemeteries operating in the archdiocese are service organizations. They should help people respond to death in the context of the promise of eternal life.

A Catholic cemetery encourages frequent visitation and prayer for the dead. *It seeks to foster an environment in which love is remembered, hope is rekindled, and faith is awakened and strengthened.* Additionally, responding to the needs of the poor is an integral part of this ministry.

We serve families best when we help them anticipate the reality of death and to make appropriate plans. In the *Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Seattle* we see the purchase of burial space as more than a business transaction. It is a teaching moment, an opportunity for growth in faith. When individuals and families acknowledge the issues surrounding mortality and make burial plans, the Catholic cemetery program must provide a ministerial response that builds faith and confidence in the *Catholic burial tradition.*

In our contact with families, we represent the larger church and our work should reflect a *welcoming, caring* and *healing* approach to clients and visitors.

## CLIENTELE

Catholic cemeteries in the *Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Seattle* exist to serve not only the Church but also the greater community and all of society by making religious statements about the individual person, humankind, life, death, and life after death.

Those who minister in Catholic cemeteries will extend their efforts to all baptized members of the Catholic tradition. Where families are divided in their religious tradition, the request for burial of a family member of another tradition will be honored.

## SERVICE COMMITMENT

Catholic cemetery services in the *Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Seattle* should reflect an active resurrection faith. Responding to the burial needs of the Catholic community is a sacred trust. People who labor in our cemeteries must be committed to supporting this ministry when death occurs.

## FUTURE

The *Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Seattle* is committed to promoting ministerial cemetery services. Each program's primary focus is comforting the bereaved. The Catholic cemetery will be a place of prayer and liturgical celebration. We will continue to express Catholic belief and practice in the cemetery environment.

ARCHBISHOP HUNTHAUSEN'S  
PROMULGATION LETTER  
10 MAY 1988

My Friends:

I am pleased to promulgate the Mission Statement for Associated Catholic Cemeteries of the Archdiocese of Seattle. This document has been prepared through the collaborative efforts of both clergy and laity in the Archdiocese and has had benefit of the experience of those most deeply involved in this ministry here in Seattle.

Contained within the document you will find theological reflections around the issues of death and burial that position us as Church and help direct our faith journey through death and burial to the brightness of the Kingdom prepared from all eternity for us.

It is our hope that employees in our cemetery system will find direction and challenge in this Statement, and that our priests, deacons and other pastoral ministers will find the document helpful in exploring ways in which parishes and cemeteries can collaborate to better serve families around the issues of death and burial, issues so intimately associated with the core of our Faith in the Resurrection of Jesus Christ and His promise that one day we too will share in that eternal life.

Finally, this Mission Statement serves as a foundational document that enables the ongoing discernment process around our Catholic burial tradition. To all who will study this document, to those who will work under its direction, to those who will utilize it to clarify further our involvement in this ministry, we join together in His joy, His peace, His love!

Raymond G. Hunthausen, DD  
Archbishop of Seattle