NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

The business of Catholic cemeteries

Tom Gallagher | Oct. 25, 2010

(Pat Marrin)

The bucolic setting of a cemetery belies the intense challenge to operate such an enterprise. This is most certainly the case for Catholic cemeteries. Like other Catholic organizations, Catholic cemeteries struggle with their mission and their management.

Why do we need Catholic cemeteries? And how do Catholic cemeteries fit in to the life of the church?

?Catholic cemeteries are an extension of the church,? says Holy Cross Fr. Richard Rutherford, professor of theology at the University of Portland, Ore., and author of the definitive *The Death of a Christian: The Order of Christian Funerals*. ?Every cemetery is a witness to the Christian faith and reminds us that death does not have the last word.?

?Catholic cemeteries provide ministries of comfort, catechesis and evangelization,? said Joseph Sankovich, former director of cemeteries for the Seattle archdiocese and a consultant to some 40 dioceses on Catholic cemeteries.

Catholic cemeteries are owned and operated by both dioceses and parishes. ?There are some 6,000 parish cemeteries in the United States and 130-140 dioceses are engaged in managing cemeteries,? said Sankovich.

?From a business perspective, I advocate that dioceses and parishes employ eight management disciplines in their operations,? he said. The eight disciplines focus on management, pastoral and public relations, operations and maintenance, inventory and development, office operations, human resources/personnel, sales, and accounting and finance.

John Cherek is director of the Catholic Cemeteries of St. Paul-Minneapolis archdiocese. He oversees a $5 million annual budget and a staff of 25, many of whom are union members. He manages five cemeteries for this corporation, which is legally separate from the archdiocese though controlled by the archbishop, who is chair and appoints the board members. An estimated 250,000 bodies are buried in their cemeteries. In the archdiocese are 110 parish cemeteries that Cherek does not manage.

Cherek says, ?We?re fighting a battle to survive as much as Catholic schools and hospitals.?

In 2007, there were 2.4 million deaths in the United States, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Yet people are living longer and the annual mortality rate is steady-to-decreasing.

?We have about 1,200 to 1,300 burials per year and that is down from 1,600 to 1,700 burials about five years ago,? Cherek said.

Another significant impact on the cemetery business is the growing prevalence of cremation.

In 2000, cremation was chosen 26 percent of the time and in 2010, is projected to be 46 percent, according to the Cremation Association of North America. The association?s surveys show that Catholics choose cremation 30 percent of the time. By 2025, the association predicts that the cremation rate will be close to 60 percent.

?Cremated remains are considered the ?final disposition? and need to be buried,? explained Dennis Fairbanks, executive director of the Chicago-based Catholic Cemetery Conference, which has more than 1,200 dioceses, parish and independent Catholic cemetery members.

Catholic cemeteries are adjusting to these new realities.

?We now allow cremated remains to be buried on top of existing graves,? Cherek said.

Another challenge in the St. Paul-Minneapolis archdiocese is the existence of Fort Snelling National Cemetery. ?About a quarter of Catholics in our area are buried at Fort Snelling each year,? said Cherek.

Catholic cemeteries are also focused on the continuing care and maintenance of the grounds.

?We educate our members about the importance of endowments or future care funds,? said Fairbanks. ?These funds need to be inviolate.? In some dioceses, cemetery revenue is sent to the diocese for non-cemetery uses.

In St. Paul-Minneapolis, cemeteries collaborate with two hospital systems and offer a quarterly fetal burial service. ?While the service is Catholic, it welcomes people of all faith traditions,? said Charity Sr. Fran Donnelly, director of life transitions for Catholic Cemeteries. ?We donate the burial site, the labor and ongoing maintenance.

?We also provide burial services for many of the victims of gang violence,? Donnelly said. ?In both cases, we open doors to people with whom we don?t always have contact and ?as church,? we offer outreach and hospitality and that?s huge.?

Donnelly would like to see more events held at cemeteries, especially around All Souls Day and All Saints Day, to impress upon people the fact that ?we are all connected,? she said.

Andrew Schafer, executive director of the Newark, N.J., archdiocese?s cemeteries, agrees. ?Catholic cemeteries today are about hope,? he said.

Schafer oversees 10 archdiocesan cemeteries and 15 parish cemeteries, almost 7,000 annual interments, 168 employees, 100 of whom are union members. All workers receive bereavement and sensitivity training. Over 1 million bodies are buried in these cemeteries.

?We are a bridge to the communion of saints,? said Schafer. ?Cemeteries are a place for remembrance, forgiveness and healing.?

Newark?s cemeteries are venues for other corporate works of mercy to be fulfilled such as food collection, transportation to bring shut-ins to visit their deceased loved ones, and fundraising around the holidays.

?The laypeople involved in parish cemetery work are a special breed, it?s a vocation for them and it?s lay ministry at its best,? said Sankovich. ?They are building up the kingdom.?

[Tom Gallagher writes *NCR*?s Mission Management column. Contact him at tom@tomgallagheronline.com.]

Online resources

- **Catholic Cemetery Conference**
  www.ntriplec.com
- **The Catholic Cemeteries in St. Paul-Minneapolis**
  www.catholic-cemeteries.org
- **Catholic Cemeteries in Newark**
  www.rcancem.org
- **Joseph B. Sankovich & Associates**
  www.sankovich.com

Source URL (retrieved on *09/18/2014 - 22:59*): http://ncronline.org/news/faith-parish/business-catholic-cemeteries