

The Catholic Cemeterian

Ministry: Then and Now and into the Future*

† **Cemetery ministry** is one of the oldest publicly recognized ministries of the Church. Burial of the dead has always been recognized by the Church as a religious rite and a Corporal Work of Mercy. Many people are involved in this ministry from the parish level to the men and women, the Catholic Cemeterians, whose vocation is the management and operation of the diocesan cemeteries. Together, as a ministry, they comfort the sorrowful and support the faithful in praying for the dead as well and the living. Regardless of the size of the cemetery, the common thread among all Catholic Cemeterians is the exercise of ministry.

† **Then and Now:** In ancient times the Cemeterians were responsible only for burying the dead and building and maintaining the catacombs in which the early Christians were buried. Today, the ministry may encompass management, finance and human resources, planning and development, grounds maintenance, engineering and construction. Cemetery ministry includes acting as a catechist and consultant in pre-need planning, providing comfort and service at the time of death, assisting with burial arrangements, and performing interment services. Most important, the Catholic Cemeterian is responsible for the compassionate care of families and friends before, during, and after the interment of a loved one.

† **Pre-Need Ministry:** An essential element of Diocesan Cemeterians' ministry is the formalized pre-need service program. Pre-need service programs enable Cemeterians to discuss with anyone the various methods of disposition and memorialization in an atmosphere free from feelings of anguish and grief that accompany a death. Catholic cemeteries fulfil several functions within their ministry. One such part of a ministry is to offer pre-need services without unnecessary pressure or inducement. Preparing funeral plans ahead of the need is not a sign of hopelessness but a compassionate arrangement for grieving loved ones.

† **Products and Services:** Purchasing products and services from a diocesan cemetery provides a guarantee of financial protection to families and permits the cemetery to develop financial planning initiatives based on stabilized revenue projections. Diocesan cemeteries offer a variety of products and services. The determination of which products and services will be offered is guided by the needs of the people, the resources of the cemetery, the history, customs, and traditions of the local Church and community, and local or state law. There is a balance between these concerns and the financial requirements of the cemetery. As a ministry, we are always conscious of the necessity to maintain a gospel approach and to be authentic in our concern. Products offered range from grave spaces to casket vaults, monuments and markers, mausoleum crypts, columbarium niches, urns and urn vaults, interior and exterior vases, and seasonal decorative items.

† **The Future:** In the future, Cemeterians will continue to direct Catholic cemeteries as ministries of service. Cemeterians will be mindful of ever-changing commercial pressures, legislative issues, societal attitudes toward death and burial, the impact of cremation. They also will forever seek new opportunities to serve the Catholic community.

*Based on "The Catholic Cemetery: A Vision for the Millennium," a Catholic Cemetery Conference publication