

Catholic Cemeteries offers workshops for healing and education

By, Lori Uchiyama-Salberg and Frances Carrasco-Leyerle

People usually come to our cemeteries to deal with someone else's death. They come to make arrangements or attend a burial service. They come to visit the graves of loved ones, remember, grieve, and pray. Their experiences at the cemetery often lead them to ask deeper questions about themselves and their own lives.

How do I want to be remembered when I die? Am I prepared to die? Does my family know what I want to happen to my body? What will happen at my funeral? What will happen to my family? I am grieving, is this normal? Where can I find help for my grief?

Four years ago, we decided that as a ministry of the church, the Catholic Cemeteries should offer help and healing. We wanted to provide spiritual enlightenment, and to help people gain a better understanding for what the church teaches about death and the traditions we practice as Catholics when a death occurs. We wanted to work with parishes, priests, and local professionals to develop educational programs. We wanted to help answer some of those questions. We began to develop a series of workshops that we could offer and present at parishes.

It took some time to develop, but with the help of some outstanding advocates, priests who are committed to this ministry like Msgr. Joseph Milani and Fr. Christopher Bennett; and parish staff like Suzanne Fitzgerald at St. Simon, Jane Ferguson at St. Mary's Los Gatos, and Janice LaMotte at St. Joseph Cupertino; and Caroline Thomas, Ministry Consultant for Resource Publications, we have created a unique service that goes beyond the boundaries of the cemetery experience.

Our parish workshops have been successful at providing people with an opportunity to discuss issues related to death in a safe, no pressure environment. We offer all of our workshops free of charge to the parish and the people who attend. We also sponsor events if a parish organizes a similar workshop independently.

We started with a few workshops per year on topics such as "Consolation of Grief during the Holidays." We now offer workshops year-round on a variety of issues related to the end of life. We have presented workshops at 22 different parishes. Some of the most popular workshops include:

Grief Workshops: These workshops are presented in a variety of ways throughout the year. Some are presented by priests and others by certified bereavement counselors. Some focus on spirituality, while others provide a support group program. Someone who attended one of our grief workshops shared that they were looking to fill a spiritual void. They had been attending a grief support group at their hospital, which was beneficial, but something was missing from the group. We were able to fulfill what was lacking.

Health & Life Issues: These workshops usually focus on advanced directives and financial estate or trust planning. The majority of people who attend an Advance Directives workshop express how grateful they are for the wealth of knowledge they gain from the expert speakers. Most people do not know that an advance directive makes your preferences about medical care known before you are faced with a serious injury or illness. This planning will spare your loved ones the stress of having to make heart-wrenching decisions later, while you are sick and can not speak for yourself.

Order of Christian Funerals ~ Planning a Christian Funeral: These workshops are presented to help you learn about Catholic teachings on the preparation of the Vigil, Funeral Mass, and Committal services. Many people want to personalize their funeral, to make the celebration special for their family and to relieve their loved ones from having to make difficult decisions during a difficult time. They learn where it is appropriate to personalize the Vigil and Funeral Mass. For those interested in cremation, they are relieved to know they can have their cremated remains present at their funeral mass. People appreciate receiving information and having the opportunity to ask questions from the cemetery and funeral homes in a comfortable, stress-free environment.

A goal of the workshop series is to get people thinking and talking about uncomfortable topics with their family and making their wishes known. The most common comment we hear from a son or daughter is, “I am so glad Mom and Dad took care of all of this. I would not have known how to handle this or what they would have wanted.”

The Catholic Cemeteries are proud to offer a service that benefits so many. We help you to prepare for death and we bury your loved ones. But, what makes us unique is that we are here to care for the living as they process and remember the one who has died. We are here long after the death and not just at the cemetery.

For more information or a schedule of workshops, please visit our website at www.ccdsj.org.

Lori and Frances are the Outreach Team for the Catholic Cemeteries of the Diocese of San Jose. They offer parish workshops on end-of-life topics and can also help arrange grief support sessions at your parish free of charge. They can be reached at 408-258-2940 or info@dosj.org