

“Coming Home” a New Ministry at Notre Dame

Builds Upon Meaning and Mission

— by William G. Schmitt



Left to right, Lou Bortolin (Milne), Thomas Gordon Smith (Architect), Reverend Peter Rocca, C.S.C. (Notre Dame) and Reverend Richard Warner, C.S.C. (Notre Dame) celebrate together after the Dedication.

Change is a constant at Notre Dame, with buildings and roads always under construction, new ideas emerging in the minds of faculty and students, rising and falling destinies of football teams, and a steady influx of returning alumni and wide-eyed visitors.

But for many years, the quiet, stately piece of land at the gateway on Notre Dame Avenue was perhaps the least-changed and most-bypassed section of the sprawling campus. This is Cedar Grove Cemetery, which Reverend Edward Sorin, C.S.C., a member of the French-based Congregation of Holy Cross, established in 1843, one year after he and his fellow Holy Cross religious founded the University of Notre Dame.

A wave of change and excitement has come to Cedar Grove during the past five years as the University pursued a new vision for its cemetery as part of an initiative called “Coming Home.”

A diverse team of experts was assembled from on and off campus, representing expertise in architecture, landscaping, cemetery management, theology, university administration, and more. Notre Dame alumni were

invited to purchase space for above-ground interment in a new mausoleum complex. The complex opened in July, 2007, and the expert team gathered at the site for a blessing and dedication ceremony on July 30.

The “Coming Home” initiative provides a ministry to the extended “Notre Dame family,” but the group at the dedication had developed its own sense of family from the closeness of their collaborations, says David Harr, assistant vice president for auxiliary services in Notre Dame’s Office of Business Operations. “Everybody left there feeling like they were part of the legacy.” Harr, who managed the project for the University, had encouraged a sense of trust and synergy by committing to his own “immersion process” by learning about cemetery management and construction, attending Catholic Cemetery Conference meetings, and always trying to “connect everything back to Notre Dame, a master plan, and our mission.”

Cedar Grove’s 22 acres of in-ground burial plots, reserved since 1977 as an employee benefit for the University’s faculty and staff, now offer above-ground interment opportunities.

The first phase of development has been completed and has stirred much enthusiasm among a new clientele. From a meditation garden between two walk-through mausolea, visitors can gaze across the campus to the statue of Mary atop the school’s famed Golden Dome.

This new mausoleum complex, named Our Lady of Sorrows at Cedar Grove Cemetery, after the patroness of the Congregation of Holy Cross, offers above-ground interment for 1,440 individuals in full-body crypts and niches for cremated remains.

“With space being quite limited for in-ground burials at Cedar Grove, the construction of mausolea for both full-body burials and especially interment of cremated remains has provided the University the ability to respond in a positive way to this pastoral need and the desire of her many alumni,” says Reverend Peter Rocca, C.S.C., the rector of the Basilica.

The mausolea have made it possible for Notre Dame, for the first time, to offer a final resting place on campus to its alumni and their families, many of whom revisit their alma mater numerous times during their lives. The “Coming Home” initiative also offers interment to qualifying members of the 900-family parish that is based on campus, worshiping in the Crypt of the Basilica of the Sacred Heart.

In the first four months of the initiative, one-quarter of the available spaces were purchased. Between the opening in July and the end of October, twenty interments have taken place, five as full-body and fifteen as cremated remains.

For the Holy Cross priests who operate the parish and oversee a



Reverend William Seetch, C.S.C., offers the Dedication's opening prayer inside All Souls Chapel.

That conversation occurred a few weeks before he passed away, and his wife soon thereafter began a lengthy dialogue and ongoing friendship with Meade as the prospect for interment of Jim's cremated remains in Our Lady of Sorrows at Cedar Grove Cemetery gradually became a reality.

Glou and Meade say the new interment opportunity for alumni has served to spark many family discussions and to prompt pre-need purchases that reduce the burden on children of the deceased. The usual reluctance to plan ahead for a family member's death seems to be eased as parents and children consider the campus as their traditional gathering place, a natural destination. Among alumni, pre-need purchases have outnumbered at-need purchases by more than four-to-one.

The University is accommodating families' strong desires for four adjacent spaces—that is, two adjoining companion crypts or niches—so that families can stay together. Parents buy for children and vice versa.

The proportions of crypts to niches was one of the major considerations when the University reassembled its team in mid-October, to start considering plans for the next phase of "Coming Home."

"We'll start construction of phase two as early as 2008," says James Lyphout, the University's vice president for business operations, but there may



As the Sun Rises: the courtyard of the Our Lady of Sorrows mausolea on All Souls Day.

be a change in what is available to our people—with more space for full-body crypts.

Judging by the level of alumni interest, Cedar Grove is likely to see several phases of expansion in the future. But each increment will be "entirely demand-driven," receiving consideration only as existing inventory starts to run out, says Lyphout, whom Harr credits with keeping the process on track and in context right from the start.

Lyphout stresses that the construction and selling of cemetery space is a pastoral response and an expansion of a cemetery ministry that dates back nearly as far as the University's founding. "If this were strictly a business decision, we would have invested the funds it took to build the first phase in our (Cemetery) endowment," Lyphout says, noting the significant returns the endowment has earned in recent years.

The "Coming Home" initiative will continue to be a ministry adapting to relentless, often unpredictable, change in cultural and societal trends. For example, the growing preference for cremation among Catholics must be figured into business projections for later phases of expansion, with architectural as well as catechetical implications for Notre Dame.

The decision to expand its ministry is a response to Domers who see the time-tested strengths of the school

and of the Church that it serves. In Notre Dame, a remarkable number of families have found a "home" that brings them together physically and emotionally, allowing them a comfort zone for thinking about the past and the future.

As in any family, a student's experiences at Notre Dame can include confronting death as part of the human condition, says Campus Ministry Director Father Warner. Masses are offered in residence hall chapels for students' deceased relatives. There are large memorial services and ceremonies. There are small-group grief seminars.

The "Coming Home" initiative has affirmed the value of experiencing what Reverend Patrick Pollard of the Chicago Archdiocesan Cemeteries calls "a total sense of Church" connecting life and death, one's student years to a life long dedication to Notre Dame, the passing thrills of a football game-day weekend to enduring memories and eternal meanings.

As Chuck Lennon, executive director of Notre Dame's Alumni Association, puts it, the cemetery at the school's gateway may be a perfect outreach not only to educate Domers but also to engage the outside culture: "We like our alumni to be examples of the Christian way of living and the Christian way of dying."

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comprehensive campus ministry program, "Coming Home" has represented an important extension of their mission of service and hospitality. Ministries already range from dozens of residence hall Masses for current students to the popular Basilica weddings and baptisms scheduled by alumni long after they have graduated.

The Office of Campus Ministry does not have a birth-to-death framework of service or a lifetime mission, explains the office's director Reverend Richard Warner, C.S.C., but Notre Dame graduates feel an enduring connection. In any given year, more than 200 marriages are celebrated, hundreds of baptisms are performed, thousands of confessions are heard, and over 50 funerals are celebrated.

"Notre Dame is about families and faith."

"Notre Dame is about families and faith," says Karmin Meade in the Office of Business Operations, recalling her conversations with alumni about interment. "In today's transient society, Notre Dame is home to her alumni. It is a place where legacy isn't just about famed athletes and noted scholars. It is about the legacy of each individual who discovered who they were and what they wanted to be as a student here. Alumni pass down their love for this place from one generation to the next. So of course they find comfort in knowing they will spend eternity here. Time and again we hear that being interred at Notre Dame means that their families will not only visit them often, but visit them in celebration of their life, their legacy." Meade has transitioned from auxiliary services to the role of services coordinator at the cemetery. Meade and the cemetery's sexton, Leon Glon, answer the numerous alumni inquiries and make the interment arrangements. They testify that the stories they hear and the purchases they see are often in the context of enduring relationships of trust and friendship formed with the

CEDAR GROVE: A TIMELINE

1843 - Rev. Edward Sorin, C.S.C., and his pioneering Holy Cross religious community establish a cemetery one year after founding the University of Notre Dame.

1844 - Cedar Grove serves both the campus community and its European and Native American neighbors. Those buried there include local founders Pierre Navarre and Alexis Coquillard; the former had established a trading post in the area in 1820, and the latter started the site's development into the city eventually called South Bend.

1977 - Some acreage is added to the cemetery, and the primary mission becomes offering burial space to members of the faculty and staff.

1999 - A second expansion of the cemetery grounds, taking some land from the adjacent golf course, brings Cedar Grove acreage to its current twenty-two acres.

2001 - Discussions start among alumni about Notre Dame as a desirable place for the future burial of themselves and their families.

alumni families, made possible by a shared faith and the family spirit of Notre Dame.

"The school means so much to people," comments Glon. "It's where they met and married their spouse. It's where they sent their kids to school and where they prayed together at the Grotto. It's where they discovered a vocation to serve the Church as priests."

There's the story of Jim Hatfield, a member of the Notre Dame class of '52, whose cremated remains were interred this October in an Our Lady of Sorrows niche as the capstone to a lifelong experience of divine providence and Notre Dame's influence. Hatfield's wife of 51 years, Kathleen, was there for the committal service with four of the couple's children.

2002 - A University committee is formed to consider the future of Cedar Grove, and Assistant Vice President for Auxiliary Services, David Harr, starts attending cemetery administrative meetings of the Archdiocese of Chicago.

2003 - A master plan and business case are developed for the expansion of Cedar Grove Cemetery's mission, with a new role of ministering to alumni.

2004 - The Master Plan is approved by the University Officer Group and the Board of Trustees.

2005 - Numerous elements of the Master Plan, including landscaping, architectural concepts, funding, sales, pricing, etc. are finalized.

2006 - Construction begins in December.

2007 - Information regarding the "Coming Home" initiative is distributed to alumni. Purchases and interments begin in July.

2008 - Anticipated start of phase two of construction.

"We were all so pleased to be able to see Jim there at the University he loved so much," Kathleen recalled. She had met Jim when he was a senior at Notre Dame, and he later proposed to her at the campus Grotto. During the latter years of his life, as he suffered from a debilitating illness, Kathleen notes that "I was never able to get Jim to talk about cemeteries."

But one day in 2005 a letter arrived from Notre Dame with first word about the "Coming Home" initiative at Cedar Grove. "I asked, 'Honey, is this where you would like to be?' He got a big smile on his face and said yes, if you can be with me," recalls Kathleen, "and I promised I would do all I could to get us there."

continued on page 8

IT TAKES A VILLAGE

Numerous organizations and units within the Notre Dame family came together to make the “Coming Home” initiative a reality.

Catholic Cemetery magazine is proud to share the following reflections from some of the key Notre Dame leadership.

A HOME WITH LESSONS FOR A LIFETIME

When Reverend Bill Seetch, C.S.C., the chaplain for Notre Dame's Alumni Association, wrote his column for a summer 2001 edition of the alumni newsletter, he talked about death or, rather, about how he and his brothers and sisters have gathered annually at a hometown restaurant to remember their deceased mother and father, and how this has always been a time for laughing and celebrating life.

The column drew a surprising number of favorable responses, some of them tweaking the idea to suit Domers;

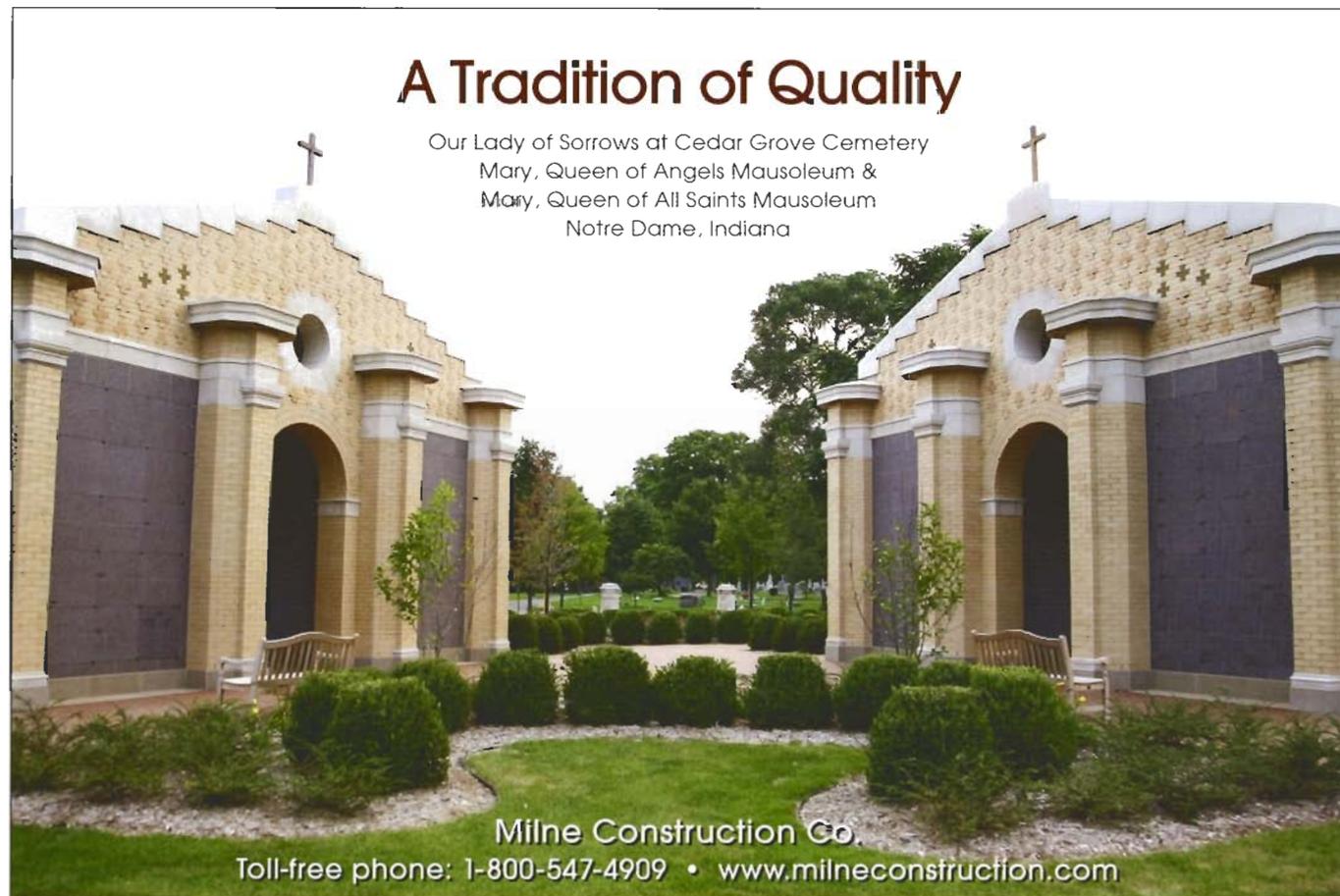
alumni wanted to cherish family memories and togetherness in a similar way, but their families had dispersed around the country for jobs and other reasons, and opportunities for large gatherings rarely presented themselves—except for those times (football games, alumni reunions, weddings in the Basilica, etc.) when everybody came back to Notre Dame. The school was playing a role that had been played in past generations by a hometown, Father Seetch noted.

Like-minded people had been suggesting for years that Notre Dame allow alumni to be buried in Cedar Grove Cemetery on campus, but the voices

have multiplied in the past several years, says Chuck Lennon, executive director of the Alumni Association.

Father Seetch discussed the idea with fellow priests. Another factor on his mind was that some alumni and their families were taking a wrong approach to “coming home.” Around various beloved campus landmarks, like Notre Dame Stadium, the Grotto, and the Log Chapel, “it was not infrequent that we would find cremated human remains scattered on the ground,” Seetch says.

continued on page 10



A Tradition of Quality

Our Lady of Sorrows at Cedar Grove Cemetery
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The Holy Cross community on campus thus started to see the trends as an opportunity for both service and education that could literally extend across the lifetimes of alumni.

The service entailed offering a place where alumni and families could have a sense of coming home, whether they

chose full-body burial or cremation, as well as a setting for celebrating life and for honoring eternal values, even at a time of death when things seem to be “passing away.”

The education component entailed addressing two aspects of the growing trend toward cremation assuring some

people that cremation is now accepted by the Catholic Church and informing others that cremated remains should be treated with dignity and interred in a sacred place that is, a cemetery. Informational material for the “Coming Home” initiative was carefully planned to bring both messages to alumni and their families.

A GOOD TEAM WITH GOOD COACHING

Before Notre Dame’s religious leaders could embrace the educational role they envisioned in connection with the “Coming Home” initiative, administrative leaders had to embrace the task of learning about cemeteries from many different perspectives.

David Harr, the assistant vice president for auxiliary services in Notre Dame’s Office of Business Operations, set the stage for this when he called Reverend Patrick Pollard one day in 2002 with a simple question to help in evaluating a contractor. It wasn’t long before Harr was attending Chicago archdiocesan cemetery administration meetings and orchestrating the development of an extraordinary interdisciplinary group.

“Harr developed into quite a ceme-terian,” recalls Father Pollard. “He got a tremendous grasp of what it means to create a cemetery.”

Notre Dame assembled a team that included Milne Construction Company, (Portland, OR), the Lakota Group (Chicago, IL), and Thomas Gordon Smith, a professor and former chair in the University’s School of Architecture.

The University Architect’s Office, a division of the Office of Business Operations that monitors and guides all campus construction projects, supported the idea of bringing Smith onto the team; Smith understands the “university gothic” style and

other components of Notre Dame’s distinctive look—its architectural “vernacular” combining harmony and diversity, says Mike Daly, a senior project manager in the architect’s office. “We wanted it [the cemetery] to be contextual with the campus.”

Smith’s private architectural consulting projects currently include a seminary and a monastery, proving his professional and personal affinity with Catholic sensibilities, but he had never designed a mausoleum before. The teamwork was invaluable. Milne, with its mausoleum experience, provided architectural and engineering insights crucial for the project, even as they welcomed guidance through the new administrative terrain of academic institutions. “They were enthusiastic about the cultural connections here,” Smith says of Milne.

Expertise had to go hand in hand with flexibility, says Lou Bortolin, president of Milne. “There had to be some give and take” all around with the University’s architectural overseers insisting on integration with campus aesthetics, planners anticipating demand for full-body crypts as well as niches, designs specifying that one mausoleum provide a view of the Golden Dome, landscape architects working from the project’s start to visually connect the new Our Lady of Sorrows at Cedar Grove Cemetery mausoleum complex with the 150-year-old cemetery with its mature, canopy-like trees, and Smith prescribing some special touches.

For example, Smith’s design called for extensive use of carved limestone for “a more traditional look,” Bortolin says. Also, the two mausolea were to be walk-through, with high ceilings, opening on to the campus vista but also “creating a sanctuary feel where it’s more sheltered,” adds Smith. The architect also selected a palate of materials—golden-colored bricks, a particular Canadian granite, and more—to signify Notre Dame’s Catholic identity and “welcome home” message.

Even though construction work had to stretch through a tough 2007 winter and many different features had to be coordinated, the participants say the project went smoothly and partners found synergies with each other.

“It was inspiring to be there” as part of such a symbiotic team, says Kevin Clark, who was project manager for Lakota. Even though this Chicago-based landscape architecture and urban planning group had not worked on cemeteries before, Clark says Lakota and Smith have shared the same vision; they want to bring the old and the new together and recall the notion of cemetery as a park or garden and widely used public space. A destination where people can stroll or meditate or both. “I can’t wait for phase two,” says Clark.

Faith in the Project

Based on the experience of Notre Dame's "Coming Home" initiative, are there any tips for other Catholic colleges that might be considering a cemetery ministry? James Lyphout, the University's vice president for business operations, has a candid response: "If you're not already in the cemetery business, don't get into it."

Lou Bortolin, president of Milne, agrees with a cautionary stance because the approval process to start a cemetery from scratch can be daunting. But Father Pollard of the Chicago Archdiocese also encourages those schools with existing cemeteries to consider their future service to alumni, and he offers the assistance of his office and the Catholic Cemetery Conference. A cemetery, he proposes, is truly sacred ground and "a very significant meeting place" for families. It acclaims "the Church in its fullness" at a time when many people's spirituality is compartmentalized and often craves a sense of focus.

At Notre Dame, the market's demographic vagaries, including the shift from full-body burial to cremation, may stand out because there seem to be so few vagaries about a fundamental market fact: the close connection among alumni experiences of the Church, their school, and their whole lives. "The affinity of our alums is unparalleled," says Lyphout.

The Holy Cross community of priests and brothers on campus says it has wanted to give a pastoral response to what has emerged as a lifelong relationship with alumni characterized by hospitality, generosity, and family ties. "For many graduates, Notre Dame is home, and it makes all the sense in the world to them to have their final resting place in the shadow of the Dome, so to speak, near to the statue of Our Lady, Notre Dame," says Reverend Peter Rocca, C.S.C., rector of the campus's Basilica of the Sacred Heart.

Another response seemed necessary when the growing Catholic adoption of cremation seemed accompanied by

a shrinking reverence for the remains of the human body. "An exaggerated sense of privacy and individualism often prevents family members from providing the custody and care of the body or cremated remains that is properly theirs," says Rocca. "Our Lady of Sorrows at Cedar Grove Cemetery ensures that the proper respect for and disposition of cremated remains will be celebrated in keeping with Christian teaching that all creation is holy, but especially the human person."

That catechetical message, as appropriate for today's students as well as for aging alums, is expressed not only in words but in the very look and feel of the cemetery as a privileged place on campus, says Rocca. "Any sacred space, including its surroundings, should enhance and reflect the reverence which every sacred edifice possesses. This would mean great care in the quality of architecture, the materials used, the furnishings and décor, as well as landscaping."

continued next page



Participants gather in the courtyard for the Dedication of Our Lady of Sorrows at Cedar Grove Cemetery.

For example, the personalization of interment spaces is regulated at Cedar Grove to avoid the distracting. The mausolea are built on a relatively small scale so as not to overwhelm the presence of the cemetery's humble chapel. Notre Dame's overall visual impression is about everything going together, despite its wide diversity, all for "the greater good of the whole," says Mike Daly of the University Architect's Office.

Besides a team of external experts who wound up resonating with the demands for a harmonious and clear message of excellence, one of Notre Dame's home-grown advantages in communicating its Catholic identity was its School of Architecture.

Faculty member Thomas Gordon Smith says he and his design team, including John Haigh, an alumnus of the school, emphasized "providing an environment that reinforces the spiritual reasons and personal

reasons" for "coming home" to Notre Dame. Further, they recognized that the reasons have much to do with respect for the past and embracing the wisdom of traditions.

Notre Dame is not alone among higher educational institutions in its expansion of on-campus interment opportunities for alumni. But the physical, procedural, personal, and spiritual connections underlying its efforts might be somewhat distinctive based on the school's powerful sense of relationships that span and unite entire lives, entire generations.

What else could drive an interest in one mausoleum's location with a line of sight to the Golden Dome? "It is for the living," says Cedar Grove Sexton, Leon Glon.

"That devotion to Mary, Our Mother, atop the Dome is so much a part of Notre Dame."

IT TAKES A VILLAGE ...

Here is just a sampling of the organizations and units within Notre Dame that came together in support of this unique campus venture.

They were able to rally around the "Coming Home" initiative partly because of a shared University mission, as well as a shared interest in ministry, ultimate life issues, lifetime ties to alumni, and the sense of a Notre Dame family.

There's also a sense of gratitude; the Offices of Campus Ministry and Business Operations thanked all of these units at the dedication and blessing in July:

- Administrative Services
- Alumni Association
- Basilica of the Sacred Heart

- Cemetery Advisory Committee
- Facilities Management
- Finance Division
- Landscape Services
- Licensing
- News & Information
- Notre Dame Media Group
- Notre Dame Web Group
- Office of General Counsel
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