



May 4, 2020

## **THE CHALLENGES OF OUR CATHOLIC CEMETERIES DURING CORONAVIRUS**

At Catholic Cemeteries of the Archdiocese of Newark, our mission is to respectfully bury the dead, a corporal work of mercy in the tradition of our Catholic faith. As we carry out this sacred mission each day, our priority is to safeguard our staff and the families we serve. This has been especially crucial in recent weeks during the COVID-19 pandemic. Cardinal Joseph W. Tobin, C.Ss.R., Archbishop of Newark, and the archdiocesan clergy and staff have worked attentively with Catholic Cemeteries to dutifully perform this ministry while maintaining a safe environment for all.

We have heard the concerns of many who unfortunately have experienced the death of a loved one during this pandemic and were unable to be present during a burial. We recognize it has been distressing and heartbreaking for so many and we share this sentiment.

Carrying out our mission during these weeks amid the pandemic has posed many new challenges unlike ever before. There has been, and continues to be, a tremendous amount of careful coordination and heartfelt effort to ensure there is no disruption to the respectful burial of loved ones. These endeavors are not always visible or apparent to the public. It may not be easy to understand the recent decisions regarding our cemeteries and the preventative measures still in effect. I would like to take this opportunity to provide some clarity and explanation.

In mid-March, in light of New Jersey's heightened social distancing measures to mitigate further spread of infection, a difficult decision was made to close all archdiocesan cemeteries to visitors. A minimal number of people was permitted at funeral services. Under the challenging conditions, it would have been extremely difficult and potentially hazardous to attempt to manage large gatherings of visitors during burial services. Currently, one funeral director, one funeral director driver, two witnesses, and a clergy member are permitted to attend a funeral. This arrangement has enabled us to provide a safe environment for all.

The decision to close our cemeteries not only supported safety and social distancing protocols mandated by the state of New Jersey for visitors and staff, but also has allowed our cemetery team to work promptly and efficiently as the extraordinary numbers of daily burials began to escalate rapidly, especially at Holy Cross Cemetery in North Arlington.

Holy Cross Cemetery serves countless Catholic families in the region and particularly in Bergen and Essex, two of the most densely populated counties in the state. These counties have registered the highest numbers of positive COVID-19 tests and deaths compared to other counties in New Jersey, and possibly in the nation.

During this pandemic, the cemetery staff at Holy Cross Cemetery have been interring on average of 25 people per day. This is more than double, or 112% higher, than the number of interments during the

same period in 2019. Since early March, there have been approximately 600 interments at Holy Cross Cemetery. This exceeds the number of *annual* burials by most of our nation's cemeteries.

Additionally, our cemetery staff must actively manage the cemetery landscape, burial plot surroundings, and especially the ground around new burials, which require regular and repeated attention in the days following an interment to refill settling soil. This challenge is exacerbated by springtime rainfall. With about 175 new interments weekly, one can imagine the difficulty in maintaining level cemetery grounds that can be safely navigated by all. A particular concern is the safety of our older and/or disabled visitors, who go regularly to our cemeteries.

Another particular challenge is the narrow cemetery roads. They cannot accommodate a multitude of visitor vehicles or a procession of vehicles at the same time that our staff are working with heavy equipment and vehicles on the grounds to facilitate the numerous interments during this time.

As per these concerns, it has been necessary that our cemeteries remain closed to protect the safety of visitors and staff, as well as to facilitate the ongoing and sharply increasing burial work of our teams. Our mausoleums, in which approximately 40 percent of burials take place, also remain closed. These are confined indoor spaces that are not conducive to social distancing protocols at this time.

Regrettably, it is expected in coming days that the numbers of burials will grow. During this coronavirus crisis, funeral homes and cemeteries have typically been receiving the deceased 7-10 days after passing away.

The unprecedented increase in the numbers of deaths has delayed burials and cremations up to two weeks or more in northern New Jersey and even longer in New York City (NYC). While NYC funeral directors are coming to northern New Jersey to cope with the unusually high number of burials, some northern New Jersey funeral directors are now turning to South Jersey to keep up with the daily demand for burial space.

Despite the daily physical and emotional challenges we continue to face due to COVID-19, Catholic Cemeteries of the Archdiocese of Newark has accepted every one of the more than one thousand burials performed in April in our six archdiocesan cemeteries. Thankfully, there have been no staff injuries during this time, which speaks to the impeccable safety measures routinely followed by our staff.

New Jersey's governor recently announced that state parks have reopened to allow people to visit without large gatherings. However, unlike public parks, our Catholic cemeteries are sacred grounds where the faithful usually gather in a group for a period of time in a common location to honor the life of a deceased loved ones. Clearly, one recognizes the potential for possible exposure to this highly contagious virus under such crowded circumstances. There have been several news stories of large funeral gatherings at other locations at which social distancing guidelines were disregarded resulting in the potential transmission of COVID-19.

No one is untouched by COVID-19, nor the pain and suffering we all have witnessed. At Catholic Cemeteries, we have ministered in a short time to too many who have lost loved ones because of this pandemic. We, too, have suffered the loss of staff and their loved ones. We are forever grateful to all on our team who are working extended hours and days at our cemeteries and in our offices to meet the immediate needs of thousands of families to whom we lovingly and respectfully minister. We must

provide our staff with safe working environments, as they also have spouses, children, and elderly parents at home.

It is my sincere hope that this information does not offend anyone. It is intended to explain some of the challenges we continue to face in the cemetery environment under current circumstances in hopes of clarifying why we have remained closed. God willing, the numbers of deaths due to this pandemic will decline soon.

As our “last responders” – our staff and clergy – continue to assist and minister to families during this time, we regularly consult with Cardinal Tobin and the archdiocesan clergy and staff, as well as with state and local municipalities to determine when it is safe and prudent to fully reopen our cemeteries and mausoleums.

**At this time, we announce the following changes to our cemetery visitation policies:**

**On Mother’s Day, Sunday, May 10, all archdiocesan cemeteries will be open for visitation from 8:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m.** and will be open for visitation every Sunday, thereafter.

**Beginning on Monday, May 11, up to 10 family members will be permitted to attend a burial service.** (Currently, two family members only are permitted.) Until further notice, all committal services are limited to immediate family only and not to exceed the recommendations of New Jersey Executive Order No. 107 (2020) and Administrative Order 2020-04, that gatherings of 10 persons or fewer are permitted.

**Beginning on Monday, May 18, cemetery visitation will be permitted weekdays,** Monday through Saturday, from 3:00 p.m. to 6:00 p.m., *after all interments are completed.*

**Memorial Day Masses at our all archdiocesan cemeteries are postponed until further notice.**

Announcements are forthcoming regarding a live-stream or video of Memorial Day Mass at Holy Cross Cemetery.

All persons entering archdiocesan cemetery and mausoleum premises **must wear a facemask and practice social distancing** as per the state’s mandate. Signs will be posted in cemeteries.

We urge all to please work with us to adhere to these guidelines for the protection of all. It would be disappointing to all if prior restrictions were reinforced if state and local mandates are not followed.

We pray that each and every one of us will remain in the safe embrace of our Lord, Jesus Christ, during these difficult times. We continue to strengthen our faith and resolve in our ministry, the care of our families and staff, and in the promise of the resurrection. May God bless us all.

Please visit our website [www.rcancem.org](http://www.rcancem.org) for the latest updates and announcements from Catholic Cemeteries of the Archdiocese of Newark.

Peace,

Andrew P. Schafer, Executive Director  
Catholic Cemeteries of the Archdiocese of Newark