

Memorial Plaza Honors Women Religious in the Northwest

— by Jim Falkner



Sister Annette Seubert, SP, stands next to the Sister's Memorial Plaza. The cremation niches may be seen in the background.

At 1:00 p.m. on October 15, 2011, Bishop Blase Cupich celebrated Mass and blessed the newly-completed Memorial Plaza for Women Religious at Holy Cross Cemetery in Spokane WA. The celebration was the culmination of a fascinating, meaningful project with a genesis going back about two years. I hope you will enjoy the story that I lived for the past two years.

The Memorial, a holy and natural landscape of stone, statuary, waterfalls and brick, tells the story of the Religious Sisters' heritage and service to the people living in the Northwest. It includes seven religious communities with members buried at Holy Cross Cemetery. Included are the Dominican Sisters of Spokane OP, Franciscan Sisters of Perpetual Adoration FSPA, Sisters of St. Francis of Philadelphia OSF, Sisters of the Good Shepherd, Sisters of the Holy Names of Jesus and Mary SNJM, Poor Clare Nuns OSC, Sisters of Providence SP (and Sisters of Charity of Providence FCSP).

The Memorial story began with a request from the Holy Names Sisters for more burial space at Holy Cross Cemetery. It seems that the sisters were close to using their last burial space and they were concerned about obtaining more graves close to their existing area at Holy Cross.

Eventually, discussion with the Sisters' leadership group and finance department easily resolved the issue of available space at a cost that was acceptable to the sisters and the cemetery. However, this simple business discussion prompted me to take a closer look at available space for all of the women religious communities that had burials at Holy Cross Cemetery.

Part of my curiosity and fascination revolved around my significant involvement with many of the women religious congregations in the Spokane area over a business career spanning 35 years. I wondered if it was possible to do something special and meaningful to honor the Sisters as these women have had a lasting impact on the life of the Church in the Northwest.

I began to research our files and review the section maps where the sisters were buried. It appeared that an original Priest and Religious area in Section B was developed when the cemetery opened in 1931. As the years passed, it was clear that the original section was not large enough to serve the future needs of the Sisters. Another area, Section J, with ample space was designated for the women religious, primarily the larger groups of Providence, Holy Names and Dominican.

After analyzing the remaining space close to the Dominican and Holy Names area, and allowing for the additional graves purchased by the Holy Names Sisters, it appeared that a large remaining area located at the top of a grassy slope next to the perimeter fence to the north might be available for a project. The creative part of my mind began to race with the possibilities, but the realistic part of the brain suggested that further work needed to be done.

To briefly put this timeline in perspective, my original thoughts about a memorial project for the women religious actually began in the fall of 2009 as I attended a Board retreat for Providence Health Care at Priest Lake Idaho. I had been in my role as Executive Director of the Catholic Cemeteries of Spokane for less than a year, and I found myself thinking of ways to add a significant Catholic symbol or area to our Catholic cemeteries. I wasn't sure what I was looking for, but I knew it probably should involve priests, sisters, the Knights of Columbus, Catholic Charities or some other Catholic group.

At the retreat, Sister Karin Dufault, the newly elected leader of the Providence Sisters, spoke to the group about their healthcare ministry and the service to the poor and disadvantaged. I knew this was an opportunity to thank Sr. Karin for her presentation and to discuss my idea with her. Sr. Karin and I had known each other for many years so I felt comfortable approaching her and discussing the project.

Providence was clearly guiding my thoughts at this time. Although my ideas were short on details, Sr. Karin was very gracious and embraced the conceptual idea of a memorial. She asked me to keep her informed as I developed the concept further. This gave me the mental permission to develop my thoughts and be creative.

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An important part of this story is my background with the Sisters. I started my business career as a CPA with an accounting firm in Spokane. One of the clients that I was assigned to audit, probably because I was Catholic, was the Dominican Sisters of Spokane. After five years of auditing the Dominican Sisters, I became aware that their Sister Treasurer was leaving and they were considering a lay Treasurer.

Thankfully, this group of women religious was willing to hire a young lay man as their Treasurer. This must have been a leap of faith on their part. During the fifteen years that I worked as their Treasurer, I served on their hospital boards and committees, learned investment portfolio management, and helped in their development of ministries for women and children. At the same time, I worked with the neighboring Holy Names community on a shared nursing home arrangement with the Dominicans as well as volunteering on some of their planning and investment committees. I got to know the Holy Names Sisters well in this process.

I also served on many Diocesan boards and committees during my time with the Dominican Sisters. It was there that I met Sr. Bernadette Botch, a Providence sister who convinced me to serve on some Providence hospital boards and committees. In 1993, the Dominican Sisters gave their hospital system to the Providence Sisters in Spokane, thus my relationships with these Sisters became further entwined. Following the 1995 merger of the Dominican Sisters of Spokane with another Dominican congregation in the Midwest, I moved into a twelve year role as the President of the Dominican Outreach Foundation which supported the ministries of the Dominican Sisters in the Spokane area and continues that function today.

At this point you are probably asking why this is important. It is because these three congregations — Holy Names, Dominican and Providence Sisters — are the largest groups with burials at Holy Cross Cemetery. They are the ones that I wanted to honor for their great and humble service in the Northwest area.



Jim Falkner beside the water feature which shows three streams of water that meet in the middle, signifying the collaborative effort of the seven orders of sisters.

Ironically, I had also worked with the Franciscan OSF Sisters and tangentially the Good Shepherd Sisters through their joint involvement with Transitions, an organization serving women and children in the Spokane area. However, my focus now was to develop a memorial honoring Dominican, Holy Names, and Providence Sisters at Holy Cross Cemetery.

In January 2010, I spoke with the leadership of the Holy Names Sisters as we began to work on their needs for additional graves at Holy Cross. Although a little skeptical, and possibly suspicious of the cost, they encouraged me to proceed. In March 2010 at a Providence Health and Services retreat in Seattle, I informally met with the leadership group of the Providence Sisters to ask if they were still willing to consider the memorial idea and I asked for a representative who would be willing to work with me on the project. Sister Jo Ann Showalter volunteered to help on behalf of their leadership group. In April 2010, I asked the Holy Names leadership group for a representative and they provided Sister Celine Steinberger. During this time, I already knew that Sister Judith Nilles, my boss for fifteen years and my Board President for another twelve years would help with the Dominican part of the memorial. Sr. Bernadette Ries, former CEO of the

Dominican Health System and a cemetery employee also offered to help. What a great group of sisters for planning and wisdom!

Following a summer of dreaming and planning, I began the process of discussing possibilities with the Sister representatives. First, our ideas were via email as we tried to determine if this project was real or a fiction from my imagination. Our first face-to-face meeting occurred on December 13, 2010 at my office at Holy Cross Cemetery.

The initial concerns involved the reason for doing the memorial and the expected amount of financial support from the Sisters. The Sisters also made it clear that they didn't want anything that was ostentatious or appearing that they were doing this for themselves. I assured them that it would not cost them any money and I would identify the project as a Holy Cross Cemetery sponsored memorial to honor the Sisters. However, I did indicate that I wanted a project that would be a significant presence at Holy Cross Cemetery. In my mind, I hoped that this project would be part shrine, part memorial with the potential of being a future pilgrimage site at the cemetery. We closed the meeting with a good consensus and

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a rough draft of the possible design. At this point, I knew that my dream had a chance of becoming a reality. Over the next few months we continued the discussion and meetings. I asked Chris Kelly, a cemetery architect, to help me refine the ideas that were being discussed. I also asked Tim Bronleewe from Oregon Memorial to give me some design ideas. Other friends from CCW (Catholic Cemeteries of the West) also offered great advice and counsel when asked. The Sisters always offered great suggestions as we looked at ongoing revisions to plans.

In March 2011, I asked Bill Bouten, a trusted friend and contractor, to oversee the project since he had been involved in every important Dominican project with me over the years. Gratefully he agreed to help when he saw the concept. In April 2011, I awarded the granite part of the project to Oregon Memorial, again following much research, recommendations and cost estimates. In May 2011, the Sister representatives and I, following some further refinements to the landscape and courtyard features by Ken Laxton, a local landscaper, agreed to move forward with the project.

In June 2011, two significant events occurred: the Sister representatives requested the inclusion of the four other religious communities buried at Holy Cross, and we agreed to include their story on a history wall; the second event

was the addition of Sister Mary Ann Farley, SNJM to our group. Sr. Mary Ann was asked to help with the burial history for Holy Names and to help our group with final design details for the history wall. Sr. Mary Ann, an organized and detail oriented person, was invaluable to the success of the project. In early July 2011, the final design concepts were approved, and we broke ground on July 12.

The Memorial Plaza was completed by September 30, 2011. Between the start of the project in July and completion at the end of September, a lot of activity occurred, as you can imagine.

The Memorial includes individual monuments for Providence, Holy Names and Dominican at the front of the courtyard. The individual monuments point in the direction of the burial locations for these three communities. The front of each monument includes the logo for the religious community. The back of the monument includes the individual name of each Sister buried at Holy Cross Cemetery. Many hours went into the design of the logo and the accuracy of 250 names each for Providence and Holy Names and 80 names for Dominican. So far, no errors have been detected. Yes, miracles do occur!

Behind the individual monuments, a beautiful courtyard opens for visitation, remembrance and prayer. The courtyard includes a water feature with three streams of water that come together in

the middle, signifying collaboration. On each side of the water feature, a history wall displays scripture, a statement about the collaborative history of the sisters and an individual history for each of the seven religious communities. Again, many hours went into refining the stories and the design of the wall. Since the words are in granite, we needed to get it right!

There is also an upper courtyard rising approximately two feet in height. A person enters this area via steps on each side of the lower courtyard. The upper courtyard features a dogwood tree in the center of paver bricks at the top of the water feature, and it also features 165 niche units available to the public for cremated remains. The niches blend in behind the history wall to the south and form a back wall to the north. Beautiful landscaping surrounds the entire memorial project. Many generous donors have contributed to the financial completion of this memorial. Sales of niches to the public will also contribute financially. Daily visitations are already occurring.

On October 1, 2011 the Sisters prepared and participated in their own personal celebration of the Memorial. Approximately 80 Sisters attended from various parts of the northwest region. On October 15 the Sisters Memorial Plaza at Holy Cross Cemetery was blessed as approximately 150 attendees were present. Both celebrations were a confirmation of the success of this Memorial.

Commissioned by their own congregations, the Sisters collaborated in endeavors to respond to the needs of God's people. Sharing their gifts and resources, the Sisters established schools, hospitals, colleges and many social services. Their legacy of vision, courage, service and faith continues to endure providing hope to all people. The Sisters Memorial Plaza at Holy Cross Cemetery documents their story for many generations to come.

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On October 1, 2011, the Sisters Memorial Plaza at Holy Cross Cemetery was celebrated as approximately 80 sisters from 7 different orders participated.