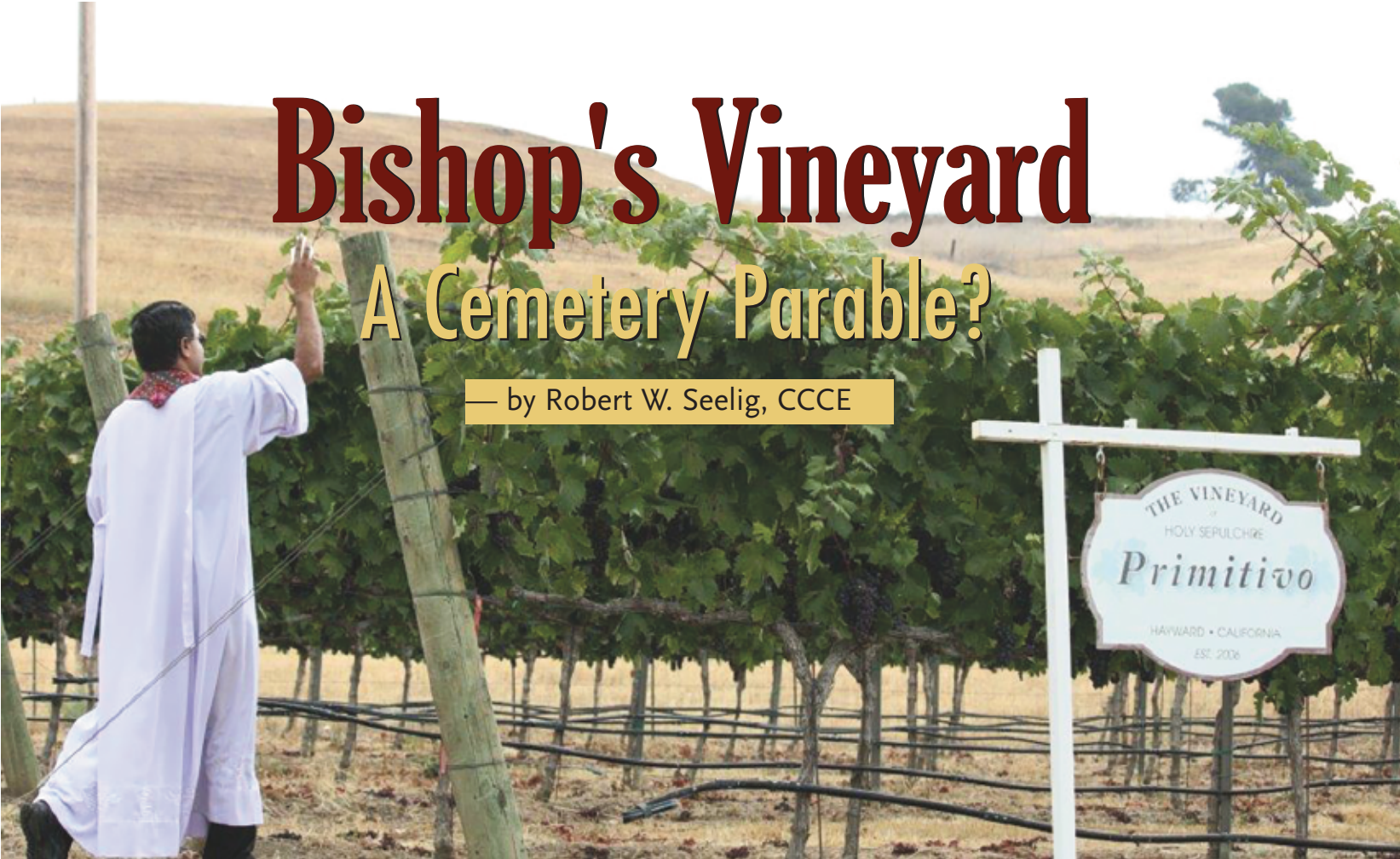


Bishop's Vineyard

A Cemetery Parable?

— by Robert W. Seelig, CCCE



Catholic cemeteries have been a story of faith and hope for generations. The simple planting of vineyards in three of our cemeteries in 2006 has fascinated the media and general public as the story of the Bishop's Vineyard wine has unfolded over the years. Our most recent media attention, a *New York Times* article titled "Turning Cemeteries Into Wine at a California Diocese," garnered national attention for our Catholic cemeteries.

While it seemed innocent enough to plant vineyards for landscaping and aesthetic purposes, it has taken on a new meaning as we go about telling the story of our Catholic faith. Juxtapose vineyards representing life and wine, used at our Eucharistic table and at our dinner table, and you have a modern day parable. What better way to discuss our faith than with a glass of wine in hand.

What started out as a way to reduce our monthly bills turned into something completely different that we never could have expected. Over a decade ago, use of Catholic cemeteries seemed to be on the decline, and the cemeteries in the Diocese of Oakland were no different. It was a struggle to cover our costs, particularly in the upkeep of the land surrounding the burial sections. We wanted to think of a way to not only reduce the costs of running the cemetery, but also build a sense of community within our cemeteries in the Diocese.

My team and I brainstormed a few ways we could improve our cemeteries. First, we bought a funeral home with a crematory so we could market cremation within the context of our Catholic funeral tradition. Our goal was to make sure that families understood the Church's preference for interment in a Catholic cemetery. Upon further examining the upkeep of the grounds, we realized that paying the \$50,000 per acre price tag for new irrigated grass wasn't manageable (or very drought-friendly).

From a Catholic Church perspective, our cemeteries have signs and symbols marking our Christian faith. You can see statues, buildings, and gardens that express our faith tradition. As I pondered what fell into this category, a unique idea came to me. What if we planted vineyards? A vineyard serves both an aesthetic purpose of beautifying the property, but more subtly it is a symbol of the Wedding at Cana and the wine that we share at communion.

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Bishop's Vineyard, continued

It symbolizes life, beauty, and to many of us, the Resurrection. When my team and I looked further into it and realized it would cost only \$17,000 per acre, it seemed like a “no brainer.” What would we do if the grapes weren’t very good? Well, how about making altar wine? You only take a sip of it at Mass, can it be all that bad? We all laughed and went along with the plan. Little did we know what was in store for us.

Before we could break ground, we had to see if our cemeteries would provide the right conditions needed for vines to grow properly. We were very fortunate to have the help of an experienced wine maker, Steve Brutocao, whose family had been in the wine business for three generations, and a vineyard manager who used to work for Wente Vineyards. With their help, we analyzed soil conditions, climate, and the trends in the industry to put together our plan.

We ultimately chose to plant at three different cemeteries: Holy Sepulchre Cemetery in Hayward, CA; St. Joseph’s Cemetery in San Pablo, CA; and Holy Cross Cemetery in Antioch, CA.

Each has a slightly different climate, so we planted different varietals at each.

We planted an acre of Chardonnay, two acres of Primitivo, and an acre of Pinot Noir at Holy Sepulchre Cemetery. (With the high quality of the grapes we started producing, our wine maker has been encouraging us to plant another 10 acres there.)

With a cooler bay area climate, St. Joseph’s Cemetery is home to six acres of our Pinot Noir, Merlot and Sangiovese grapes. The Pinot Noir grape is particularly thin-skinned, and its friend, Merlot, ripens especially early and thrives in the colder soil.

Holy Cross cemetery in Antioch, CA, is home to six acres of our Cabernet Sauvignon and Zinfandel grapes. The warmer climate serves these thick-skinned varietals well, as they are less susceptible to burn and rot. Cabernet is the last grape to be picked during growing season, so it’s best to keep this thriving, away from any cold or damp conditions.

Our first couple of years of winemaking were a bit bumpy. The grapes were good, but we learned quickly that parishioners are pickier about their altar wine than we had first imagined.

A good zinfandel and chardonnay are not the preference at morning Mass! Who would have thought? Maybe those varietals are great at the dinner table, but not in the morning after you have just brushed your teeth. Everyone wanted something sweeter.

As our production of grapes increased, we decided to take our grapes to a local wine maker, Shauna Rosenblum of Rock Wall Wine Company, whose father was famous for his zinfandel wines at Rosenblum Cellars. Shauna and her team helped us to make up a rosé that we offered to local parishes at no cost for use as Sacramental Wine, which is a practice that we continue to this day. We provide over 600 cases of Sacramental Wine per year to our local parishes.

The Wine Was Rated Outstanding Quality by a Local Wine Maker

Shortly after we began doing this, Shauna and her team analyzed each variety of grapes and was amazed by their outstanding quality. They approached me with an interesting idea. Why not make serious wine? And so we did, under the label, Bishop’s Vineyard.

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Our Next Step was to Produce 'Serious' Wine - Thus, Bishop's Vineyard Was Born

Wine making is much about story telling. First, good grapes make good wine. The winemaker's job is to accentuate the grapes and not mess it up. As a consumer of wine, what stands out is the label and the story. We had labels designed that touched on imagery of Christ. The Bishop as shepherd is symbolized in each of our labels. The story of the land is important too. The French term for this is *terroir*. You can imagine that cemetery vineyards sound interesting even to the casual observer. Lastly, you also want to know the story of the wine maker. In this case that conversation eventually leads you from the cemetery director to the wine maker to the Bishop and eventually back to the Gospel. It is a great conversation over the dinner table.

Bishop Wines Have Won Awards at Local and International Competitions

The last piece of the puzzle is building a reputation and a lasting image in the eye of the public. Bishop's Vineyard has developed a strong reputation in just a few years with both press coverage and entering our wines in several different competitions. In 2015 at the Grand Harvest Wine festival, four of our wines medaled, with our 2013 Cabernet Sauvignon winning a gold medal. So far in 2016, that same Cabernet Sauvignon won silver at the San Francisco Chronicle Wine Competition and at the Monterey International Wine Competition.

We created a wine club in order to benefit Oakland Catholic schools. Over the last two years, our Catholic cemeteries have donated \$35,000 towards an endowment for tuition assistance for needy children. Our aid allows low-income parents to help pay for their school tuition. At some point we hope that this can generate a lot of income for the schools and at church sponsored charity events.

I've been asked by people, "Have you ever broken even?" Or "Why do you still make wine if it isn't to make



Robert Seelig (left), CCCE, presents a \$25,000 check to Most Rev. Michael C. Barber, S.J., Bishop of Oakland. A portion of the revenues from wines purchased through the Bishop's Vineyard Wine Club is contributed to an endowment fund created to provide tuition assistance for needy students wishing to attend a Catholic school.

money?" I've always thought of my vocation as a cemetery much like that of a servant in the Parable of Talens. What would I do if God gave me a bag of money? In this case I have been entrusted with our cemeteries and the job to bury the dead, serve the bereaved, and in the process tell the story of our faith. In the Diocese of Oakland and a number of dioceses where I have been working, the real focus has been on re-invigorating the cemeteries with new programs, additional staff, and community outreach.

While the cemeteries have become financially stable and are growing organizations, the vineyard has become a very popular vehicle for telling the story.

My purpose was literally to help breathe life into the cemeteries by making them an active place in our communities where we can find meaning. The vineyards are symbolic of my mission in creating Catholic Funeral and Cemetery Services and later, the founding of Catholic Management Services. The fact that the vineyards produce fruit which could be made into wine for use in our churches, for raising funds for charities, and for conversation around the dinner table was not lost on me. At the same time, I never wanted anyone to think that we took ourselves too seriously. This has been a fascinating and fun project, which we have learned makes for a great story.

We hope that our vineyards and Bishop's Vineyard wines allow people to deepen their emotional ties to our cemeteries. We don't want people to view cemeteries as the land of the dead and a museum of the past, but rather to be reminded of the Resurrection when they visit a loved one. From the time we planted our first vine to where we are now, our mission hasn't changed. We want to pique people's interests in our cemeteries while helping out the community around us. ♥

Cheers!