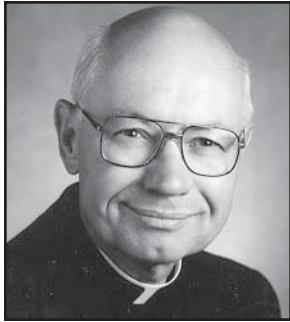


Our Church tradition: remembering our dead

by Bishop William S. Skylstad

Memorial Day always presents for



us a day to reflect upon those who have gone before us in sacrifice of their lives for our nation. Remembering has

always been an important part of our Catholic tradition – for example, each time we celebrate Eucharist. Jesus told the disciples at the Last Supper: “Do this in memory of me.” So here we are, 2,000 years later, celebrating in memory of what Jesus did for us.

In the Church, we have always had the tradition of remembering those who were an important part of the community of faith. A tour of the catacombs around Rome provides a rich experience of how the early Christian community creating memorials for members of the faith community, with places of burial and with images that were meaningful and spiritually uplifting. In addition, we in the Church have the tradition of remembering the saints and honoring their place of burial. The Basilica of St. Peter and the Basilica of St. Paul Outside the Walls in Rome are recognized as places of burials for these saints. They continue to be great places of devotion to this day. The tombs of the saints help us remember and be inspired.

The Church considers our funeral liturgies and the places of burial as a very important part of our tradition. Very often our cemeteries are associated with our parish churches. In the City of Spokane, we are blessed to have three Catholic cemeteries to serve all of our parishes in the city area. Holy Cross Cemetery is situated on North Wall Street, just inside the city limits. That cemetery has been in existence since the '30s. St. Joseph Cemetery in Otis Orchards serves the Spokane Valley parishes and is a

continuation of the former legacy of a parish cemetery now incorporated into the Catholic Cemeteries of Spokane system.

Most recently, Queen of Peace Cemetery has been established on grounds purchased from Immaculate Heart Retreat Center. This latter place of burial is only in the initial stages of development with several burials already occurring there, including Msgr. David Rosage, the founding director of IHRC. There is also a section for priests and deacons. The location next to the retreat center, with its beautiful grounds, provides a natural atmosphere for prayerful reflection and appreciation.

Twice a year Mass is celebrated at Holy Cross Cemetery, on Memorial Day and All Souls Day (Nov. 2), and Masses at Queen of Peace and St. Joseph only on Memorial Day. We are blessed with these facilities, and I hope you can support them in your funeral plans. We in the Church consider our cemeteries to be sacred ground. Our three cemeteries are consecrated for this sacred purpose. This ground is in faith a manifestation of the Church and Christ. In a very real way they reflect our loving care and concern for the dead, for those who have gone before us, especially members of our families and our friends. At Holy Cross, we also have a burial plot for unclaimed bodies. They also need our respect and prayers. As a Catholic community, we want to give witness to our belief that every person is a brother and sister in Christ, even the forgotten.

Recently, the funeral industry and funeral services have become large conglomerates in a highly competitive atmosphere. Cremation has become increasingly popular (about 40 percent of the burials in this area). The Church does not oppose cremation, but calls us to have a deep and loving respect for the cremains as they are placed in the ground, or in niches. I would encourage Catholic families to plan for the future in pre-need arrangements for the Catholic cemetery as a gift or

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expression of thoughtfulness when they address the death of a loved one.

We are very blessed with our funeral liturgies in our Catholic tradition. We first as a community of faith greet the body at the vigil service. Sometimes this service consists of a Scriptural prayer service and/or a rosary. This is the time to greet and console the family and sometimes tell the stories. The funeral Mass is a wonderful moment of processing the death of a loved one in context of Eucharist as we listen to the consoling Word of God and receive the Bread of Life. Then come the final commendation at the end of Mass and the procession with the body to the place of burial at the cemetery.

The brief ceremony of the burial rite concludes this earthly physical relationship, recognizing that the body now represents a person who is with us in a very special, different way. Often today during the burial, the casket is gently and slowly lowered into the ground as the community gathers around, observes and reflects. This simple ritual expresses a kind of finality of the old life to a marvelously new transformation to which we all must look forward. With the burial of priests, we always do that. It is a powerful moment of recognizing the completion of God's mighty work in a person's life.

This Memorial Day gives us the opportunity to celebrate memories and the gift of life from God to all of us, including those who have gone before us. Our Catholic cemeteries provide a continuing sense of our community of faith in union with all the saints and those have died in faith.

May all of the souls of the faithful departed through the mercy of God rest in peace. Amen!