

Over the centuries, a tradition has grown that it is the right, privilege and duty of every Catholic to seek burial in a Catholic cemetery. However, living in the midst of changing circumstances has resulted in changing perceptions in the minds of some regarding the relevance of the Catholic cemetery in the scheme of their lives. While the Church has moved away from a legislative stance and no longer mandates that all Catholics be buried in Catholic cemeteries, the reasons for maintaining and using Catholic cemeteries are as powerful and compelling as ever. The usual and proper place for the burial of Catholics is still the Catholic cemetery in view of the values contained in the Church's burial tradition....

In the Creed, Catholics express as part of their faith belief in the Holy Spirit...the communion of saints...the resurrection of the body and life everlasting. These three doctrines are clearly demonstrated and symbolized in the Catholic cemetery. The Catholic cemetery is an expression of faith, an extension of the parish community, and a life affirming response to the universal mystery of death and resurrection. The life of God dwells in the human person through the waters of Baptism. Catholic teaching has always presented the human body as the temple of the Holy Spirit. Consequently, the Church has concerned herself with regard for the body before and after death. We speak of treating the total human person with dignity in all the stages of existence. It is in this spirit that the Church provides cemeteries, which reflect the dignity of and reverence, for the body.

Today, it is asked with greater frequency whether the Catholic character of the cemetery is significant as long as the cemetery has dignity and beauty.

Certainly there are many such non-sectarian cemeteries available.

The response is that public or non-sectarian cemeteries must be just that: non-sectarian. These cemeteries must be careful not to impinge on the religious beliefs and personal sensibilities of those who will use their facilities and these are people of varying beliefs and no beliefs. By their very nature, non-sectarian cemeteries are devoted principally to the memorialization of the deceased.

Catholic cemeteries, on the other hand, serve as a symbol or extension of the parish community. They give witness that the community of faith is unbroken by death. Moreover, we are one with Christ in life, death, and resurrection. St. Paul tells us, "If we have grown into union with him through a death like his, we shall also be united with him in the resurrection" (Romans 6.5) and "...whether we live or die, we are the Lord's" (Romans 14.8).

This union with Christ and community was evident in the early crypts, which served not only as burial places but also as places for the celebration of the Eucharist. The memorial of the death and resurrection of the Lord offered the promise of eternal life. Later, a tradition of local Catholic cemeteries arose as the sacred places where the remains of the beloved dead might be interred with reverence and respect. Often the cemetery was located behind or adjacent to the church so that the faithful could be buried near the altar, near the place where the

Pascal mystery was memorialized. The continuity of the faith community is symbolized in a beautiful way by such parish cemeteries. Catholics wanted to be buried near the place where they had worshipped in life, near the community of which they had been a part.

The pattern of Catholic population growth now often requires larger regional cemeteries as well as those attached to parishes. The principle remains that Catholic cemeteries are an integral part of the Church's traditions and rites. In the Code of Canon Law, **Catholic cemeteries-like churches, chapels, shrines and altars-are considered "sacred places."**

They are given a special blessing to set them apart and to highlight their sacred character. Likewise, **the Order of Christian Funerals refers to three principal moments: the vigil (wake), the Funeral Mass (parish church), and the committal (cemetery). This corresponds to the Catholic tradition which includes sacred times (vigil), sacred rites (funeral), and sacred places (cemeteries).**

Another way in which Catholic cemeteries differ from non-sectarian cemeteries has to do with Catholic belief about human destiny. Catholic cemeteries are not just memorials to the dead or monuments to times past. They do not honor the deceased merely for what they did on earth. Nor is respect and reverence emphasized solely because the body had been sanctified by the sacramental life. Catholic belief about death as symbolized by the white vestments and the Paschal Candle used at the Funeral Mass, focuses on hope in the promise of the resurrection. Not only does the soul live on but the total human person is destined for final glorification, final transformation into the image of Christ.

Catholic cemeteries are monuments to eternity. They speak the special message of Christian belief in the abundance of eternal life to a world that at times seeks fullness of life within the passing realities of space and time. Catholic cemeteries proclaim the sublime mysteries of faith in a personal God, of hope in the resurrection of the glorious reunion of the members of Christ's Mystical Body. As such, Catholic cemeteries are a consolation to the bereaved and an inspiration to the living.

Catholic churches bear testimony to belief in the existence of God and his revelation to us through Jesus Christ. Catholic educational institutions testify to the community's faithfulness in spreading the good news and to concern for the education of the entire human person. Catholic hospitals manifest the lasting interest of the Church in the total well being of its members. Other Catholic institutions for the young, the troubled, the aged and the less fortunate declare to the world that the love of Christ is alive in the modern world. So too, the Catholic cemetery is an eloquent witness. It professed belief in the resurrection of the body and eternal life. The Catholic cemetery is a holy place where religious ceremonies are held, where people pray for their beloved deceased, where the living find the consolation of faith.

Death is an experience that touches all. **A visit to a Catholic cemetery is a reminder of what death is all about- a step to a new and eternal life with the Risen Lord.** Christ has died! Christ is risen! Christ will come again!