

**Blessing of New Altar
St. Barbara Cemetery
Witt, Illinois**

May 30, 2015

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Bishop of Springfield in Illinois**

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ, it is good that we are here at St. Barbara Cemetery to bless this new altar upon which the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass will be celebrated on various occasions. While it is generally not our practice to celebrate Mass outside of a church, there is some precedent in the history of the Church of celebrating Mass in a cemetery.

During the first few centuries following the Resurrection, Christians in Rome faced much persecution and they were forced to find safe places in which they could celebrate Mass. Many houses in Rome were safe havens where Christians could gather in secret and so have Mass in relative safety. Another popular location was the catacombs which were underground passageways in which Christians would bury their dead. It became a common practice to celebrate Mass on the tombs of those who had died, especially those who had been martyred for their faith. As a result, the early Christians celebrated Mass on a regular basis in a cemetery. And

although the circumstances are quite different than they were nearly two-thousand years ago, we do share something in common with those early Christians as we gather among our beloved dead in this cemetery today to celebrate Mass.

Part of the significance of celebrating Mass where the dead are buried is to highlight the concept of the Communion of Saints which is at the heart of our faith as Catholics. This teaching reminds us that death does not separate us from one another. St. Paul witnesses to this faith in his Letter to the Romans when he tells them that nothing, including death, “will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 8:39). Through the gift of God’s grace, we are united with our brothers and sisters who make up the Body of Christ, both here on earth, and beyond in Purgatory and Heaven.

The breaking of this barrier between life and death was made possible by the death of Christ on the Cross. Each time we celebrate the Mass, we enter into that saving event and are connected in a special way with the living and the dead. Our participation in Mass here on earth unites us to the eternal liturgy in Heaven where the saints and angels look up upon the face of God and offer Him endless praise.

The grace of each Mass celebrated here on earth is also the most powerful means of assisting those who await their entrance into that glorious celebration in Heaven. The greatest act of charity that we can offer for our beloved dead is to have them remembered at the Mass, through which they receive the effects of Christ's sacrifice which has destroyed death for all eternity.

At the center of the celebration of the Mass is the altar. It is here where we enter into that saving action of Christ. In a very real sense, it is the altar here on earth that unites us to the altar in Heaven. The altar is a visible sign of our communion with the entire Body of Christ. It is therefore important that we treat the altar with the greatest amount of respect and reverence, as we are doing today as we prepare to bless this altar.

Even when Mass is not being celebrated at this altar, it's presence here should serve to strengthen your faith in the very real connection that exists with those who have gone before us marked with the sign of faith. It is one thing to visit the individual graves of our loved ones, but such visits can leave us focusing mostly on our memories of the past. The altar reminds us of the present communion that we share with our loved ones

and the future Resurrection that we look forward to when we reach the end of our earthly pilgrimage.

As we prepare to bless this altar and celebrate Mass on it, let us renew our faith in the power of Christ's death and Resurrection, a power which is stronger than death itself. May this altar serve as that visible reminder of our communion with those buried here, not as previous relationships, but ones that continue through the gift of God's grace. Let us strive to always remain in that communion so that we will be found worthy to join all of the angels and saints in the Heavenly liturgy.

May God give us this grace. Amen.