

**Homily for the Memorial Day Field Mass**

**Calvary Cemetery  
Springfield, IL**

**May 29, 2023**

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Bishop of the Diocese of Springfield in Illinois**

Reverend Fathers and Deacons, consecrated men and women, esteemed members of the military, my dear brothers and sisters in Christ, it is good that we are here to celebrate our annual Memorial Day Field Mass.

For many, Memorial Day means the beginning of summer. To others, it is a day off to go shopping. But as those of you gathered here know, the real meaning of Memorial Day is to honor those who have died in the service of this country.

The word “memorial” comes from the Latin word “*memorare*,” which means “to remember.” So Memorial Day is a day set aside to remember the men and women who have died serving these United States, in order that you and I might live with greater security, justice, and peace.

I remember, in particular, my father, the late John H. Paprocki, Jr., who served as a sergeant in the United States Army in Europe during the Second World War. Because of his pharmacy background, he served in the medical

units of field hospitals during the war, mainly in France. When I was a young boy, I would sometimes accompany him to the local VFW post, the Veterans of Foreign Wars. Dad was also a proud member of the Catholic War Veterans, serving as Commander of our parish's CWV post, St. Casimir Post #1399. Born in 1921, Dad was a member of what has become known as "The Greatest Generation," a fitting name for those who fought and won the war that saved the free world from Nazi conquest and Japanese imperialism. For this, we all owe them a great debt of gratitude.

The origins of this national day of prayer are found after the conclusion of the Civil War. In 1868, the Grand Army of the Republic, an association of Union veterans, began what was called Decoration Day. Decoration Day was set aside as a day to honor the war dead by decorating their graves with flowers. On the first Decoration Day, children orphaned by the Civil War placed flowers on the graves of both Union and Confederate soldiers. In this, we see very clearly that in the eyes of God we are all equals. Similar observances and customs had already been held throughout the nation the previous two years. Major General John Logan of the Grand Army of the Republic said the following regarding this practice of remembrance and respect:

We should guard their graves with sacred vigilance. ... Let pleasant paths invite the coming and going of reverent visitors and fond mourners. Let no neglect, no ravages of time, testify to the present or to the coming generations that we have forgotten as a people the cost of a free and undivided republic.<sup>1</sup>

As Catholics, this respect for the deceased has been central to the practice of the Church since its very beginning. While the exact rite for the funeral and burial of the faithful has evolved through the ages, the core of the Catholic Church's funeral practices remains focused on the celebration of the Mass of Christian Burial as the Church's final way of assisting the deceased in their journey to their heavenly reward.

Recently, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops Committee on Doctrine issued a statement "On the Proper Disposition of Bodily Remains," which provides principles for evaluating the newer methods and technologies for disposition of the bodies of the deceased. These principles are based on the 2016 "Instruction regarding the Burial of the Deceased and the Conservation of the Ashes in the Case of Cremation" by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith.

In the statement, the Committee affirms that every human being has been created in the image of God and has an inherent dignity and worth.

Furthermore, since “every man and woman is a unity of body and soul, respect for the person necessarily includes respect for the body.” The Church considers burial to be “the most appropriate way of manifesting reverence and respect for the body of the deceased,” as it “clearly expresses our faith and hope in the resurrection of the body.” The Church permits cremation unless it is chosen for reasons contrary to the faith, but the preferred method is burial of the full body.

The Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith’s Instruction provides the essential requirements for disposition of ashes in order to show proper respect, the first of which is that they “be laid to rest in a sacred place.” Moreover, they may not be kept permanently at home, divided among family members, scattered, or encased in jewelry or other mementos.

An important part of the respect that we owe to the dead is “to preserve their memory in the Church and to pray for them.” Thus, reserving the ashes in a sacred place is crucial because it helps to prevent the deceased from being deprived of “the prayers and remembrance of their families and of the Christian community as a whole.”

The two most prominent newer methods for disposition of bodily remains that are proposed as alternatives to burial and cremation, alkaline

hydrolysis and human composting, fail to satisfy these requirements for proper respect for the bodies of the dead. After the alkaline hydrolysis process, there are some bone remnants that could be pulverized and placed in an urn, but there are also about 100 gallons of liquid into which the greater part of the body has been dissolved; this liquid is treated as wastewater and poured down the drain into sewer system. At the end of the human composting process, the body has completely decomposed with the accompanying plant matter to yield a single mass of compost; there is nothing distinguishably left of the body to be placed in a casket or an urn and laid to rest in a sacred place.

The statement ends by recalling that our faith teaches us that our ultimate destiny is the resurrection of our bodies. "We are therefore obliged to respect our bodily existence throughout our lives and to respect the bodies of the deceased when their earthly lives have come to an end. The way that we treat the bodies of our beloved dead must always bear witness to our faith in and our hope for what God has promised us."

On this day where we gather to continue the tradition of honoring those who have died serving their country, I urge you that, in the midst of a time that places less and less value on traditional mourning and burial

practices, you not lose sight of the important role that the funeral Mass and Christian Burial plays in our lives as Catholics. For as people of faith, we see death not as a wall where life ends, rather we see it as a gate that links the world in which we live on earth to the heavenly reality in which we aspire to live eternally.

Standing at Gettysburg in 1863, President Abraham Lincoln set before us the way to honor the fallen members of our nation's military. He suggested "that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion - that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain - that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom - and that government of the people, by the people, for the people shall not perish from the earth."<sup>2</sup>

It is the Holy Spirit who fills our hearts with hope in the promise of the resurrection, a hope that has brought us here today to honor our beloved dead and to decorate their graves. We gather not only to honor them, but - more importantly - to implore the Lord's mercy upon them, that he might find their faith genuine and admit them into his kingdom.

May God give us this grace. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs, "Memorial Day History," [www.va.gov](http://www.va.gov).

<sup>2</sup> President Abraham Lincoln, *Gettysburg Address*, November 19, 1863.