

A PLACE OF PRAYER, HOPE AND CONSOLATION

Homily at St. Joseph's Cemetery, Brantford May 23, 2015

Dear friends, I am happy to welcome all of you to this annual Mass at St. Joseph's Cemetery and I thank the Catholic Cemeteries of the Diocese of Hamilton for the work that they have done to organize and host it.

A few months ago, one of the Saturday columnists in the local Hamilton newspaper had a particularly poignant article. Although he admits that he has never been much for visiting cemeteries, he decided one day to make just such a visit. His mother had died a few months earlier and been laid to rest in Holy Sepulchre Cemetery in Burlington. So he made the trek out to that cemetery, drawn by the desire to visit his mother's grave. And he describes how, in that place, he was overcome with emotion: feelings of love for his mom and feelings of loss. A wave of grief came over him. He very touchingly admits that he just had to sit down and cry. Yet he describes that experience in positive terms. There was something cathartic about it. It was important for him to express his grief. And although he doesn't mention it, I suspect that he offered a prayer at his mother's grave – because that is what we Catholics tend to do.

Whether you're a cemetery person or not, whether you visit places like this occasionally or often, as Catholics, we look at cemeteries in a particular way. And that is because of what happened at the empty tomb of Jesus 2000 years ago. It is good for us to reflect on that as we continue in the celebration of Easter, a fifty day season of joy. On Easter morning, the angels asked the women: "Why do you look for the living among the dead?" Why indeed? Because of what happened at Easter, we believe that death does not get the last word and the grave is not our home forever. So while we visit cemeteries as a sign of respect and love for those who have gone before us, we truly do not look for them here. We understand that they have been made for a life of eternity: their spirits have flown. Their bodies reside here temporarily until the great resurrection of the dead on the last day.

So what is a cemetery for us? It is a place of prayer, of hope and of consolation. By calling it a place of prayer, we say that it is a holy place: a place where we can reflect, ponder, be in silence with the Lord, and share with God our deepest thoughts and feelings. It is a place of individual and communal prayer: we often come together in such places to pray with others. When the mortal remains of someone are committed here, people unite and pray together. We gather annually in this cemetery to offer the greatest prayer of all, the Eucharist. It's not a stretch to say that prayers ascend from this place, probably 365 days a year. Even as we tend to those mundane tasks around grave sites – cleaning and digging and planting - we can find ourselves

uttering a silent prayer or perhaps intuiting a wordless prayer. We should never cease to pray for our departed loved ones, that their souls may be freed from sin and they may be united to God. A Catholic cemetery always beckons us to prayer.

A cemetery is also a place of hope. It expresses our belief in eternal life won for us by Jesus. Paul says that just as we have been baptized into the death of Jesus, so we will be joined to him in his resurrection. At every baptism we light the Easter candle and we do the same at a funeral. The Easter candle symbolizes that we have been joined to Christ, and so we hope to share in his rising from the dead. In a Catholic cemetery we affirm that we are a people of hope and that our hopes rest on what Jesus did for us in his death and resurrection. So even as we tend with care the graves of our loved ones, we know that the grave is not the end.

A cemetery is a place of consolation. When we come here we may be grief stricken; we may be burdened by the weight of sorrow – and that is actually a good thing, because grief is the flip side of love. No wonder Jesus told us blessed are those who mourn: for to mourn is a sign of having loved and having been loved. And there is another reassurance given in the famous beatitude: that grief and sorrow do not mark the end of all blessing in our lives. If we believe in God and the life of eternity then even when we mourn, we do so secure in the knowledge of God's goodness and love. Even if it may feel like it on some days, we know that the mercies of the Lord are not all past. Jesus also promised us that he would help us to carry our burdens. Grief is lightened when we can share it with others; whether that happens informally or formally, we are stronger when we pull together. So when our faith in the Lord is strong, we will be ready to turn our grief over to him. He doesn't promise to remove it but he does promise that he can lighten our load. That is what the gift of faith gives us, and that is why a Catholic cemetery is a place of consolation.

So we gather today in this special place. It is not simply a lovely park or a manicured garden. For us, it is always a place of prayer, hope and consolation. It is holy ground. It is a place of blessing and of God's presence. May it be so for you every time you visit here.

Most Reverend Daniel Miehm
Auxiliary Bishop of Hamilton