The first time I became smitten with cemeteries was while I was an undergraduate at St. John’s University in Collegeville. There on a gorgeous sloped hill to the west of the lake was the cemetery where the monks had been buried for generations, marked with simple gray granite stones. I found it a marvelous place of bringing life back to earth.

My grandparents died a few years later while I was in seminary. It was the first time in my life that I lost immediate family, and I was particularly grieved about my grandmother, to whom I was very close. I was about 25 years old at the time and my grief seemed way out of proportion. I couldn’t shake it. Then I took a trip by myself to the Catholic cemetery in Rochester, MN where my grandmother was buried. I cried for half an hour at the grave, and then it was okay. That visit was an absolute catharsis for me; I came to realize how important the cemetery was.

Catholics take very seriously the realm of the tangible and the physical. There’s something about a physical space like a Catholic cemetery that is sacred to us. It is irreplaceable. Catholics and all people need these spaces and holy sites that we can claim as our own.

Cemeteries, like parishes, can offer powerful opportunities for evangelization at times of death and at times of remembrance. A death draws people to us, even those who are not part of our faith. Maybe they have drifted away from the church or left in anger or perhaps religion has not been a part of their life experience. No matter what the case, a funeral and burial are one time people come to us openly, hungering for something – not for doctrine or for an evaluation of the deceased’s life but for comfort, compassion, hope and help.

I taught theology at St. Paul Seminary for 15 years before I came to St. Pascal’s a few years ago. It’s an older parish with 60 to 70 funerals a year. When I arrived, I was concerned that I didn’t have a history with the parishioners nor did I know them well. But I came to realize that at times of sorrow, I didn’t have to know them well to do my job. The funeral rites are the time to talk about God’s understanding and how God rises to the forefront when we need Him most. It became a great learning for me.

It has been a privilege for me to preside at Resurrection Cemetery’s annual Mass of Remembrance each Christmas season for the past 10 years. The service brings together as many as 175 people who have lost loved ones who are buried or entombed at Resurrection. I rarely know anyone there nor do I know the stories that bring us together, but the Catholic faith that fills the chapel, and the shared experience of grief, creates its own very intimate sense of community and comfort.

How we respond in these sacred moments is pivotal. To be Catholic is to take care of people when they are vulnerable. That is what our hospitality is all about. That is what our faith is all about — bringing the messages of hope, joy, reconciliation and life to those who need them most.

Learning about the circle of life

St. Agnes School 8th graders once again cleaned graves at Calvary Cemetery in St. Paul as part of their religion class. This was the third year that religion teacher Joan Decker brought her 8th graders to Calvary. Earlier in the year, a group of JROTC students from Cretin-Derham Hall tended to hundreds of Resurrection and Calvary gravesites belonging to the Brothers of the Christian Schools and the Sisters of St. Joseph of Carondelet.

Eighth-graders from St. Agnes School raked and weeded around Calvary Cemetery graves.
Though alone in life, Catholic woman joined with family at death

Like many Catholics, Delora Mayer had earlier in her life set up a charitable estate gift with the Catholic Community Foundation (CCF).

So when Mayer’s bank notified CCF about the elderly woman’s passing last summer, Kelly Webster, the Foundation’s vice president of development and donor engagement, was not surprised.

But Webster was caught off guard by the rest of the news.

“We were told that Delora, who was in her 90s, had died alone in her apartment,” Webster said.

“Officials had been unable to track down any next of kin and her body was still being held by the office of the Hennepin County Medical Examiner.”

For Webster, one thing was clear — Delora Mayer was deserving of a Catholic funeral and burial and CCF could make sure she received these final rites of the Church.

Mayer had resided in West St. Paul, but her name wasn’t found on parish rolls. Nevertheless, the pastor, staff and Rosary Society at the Church of St. Joseph stepped forward to host a funeral at the church.

Meanwhile, Webster contacted The Catholic Cemeteries for burial arrangements. A search of the cemeteries records showed that not only were Mayer’s parents buried at Calvary Cemetery but there was also a grave in the family plot for Delora.

“We were so relieved and grateful to learn that Delora could be buried with her family,” Webster said.

And so, one day last summer, Fr. Michael Creagan of St. Joseph’s honored the life of Delora Mayer at a Catholic funeral, with CCF staff acting as pallbearers. At the burial at Calvary, cemetery staff joined them in gravesite prayers as the Catholic woman was laid to rest.

Reflecting on the sequence of events that concluded at Calvary, Webster said it was an example of organizations of the Church working together for a common mission.

“This was truly the Holy Spirit at work,” she said. 🕊️

Volunteers are needed at The Catholic Cemeteries!

By Sr. Fran Donnelly, B.V.M., Director of LifeTransition Ministries of The Catholic Cemeteries

The Catholic Cemeteries, like parishes, schools and many other agencies and organizations, relies on the good will and generosity of people willing to share their time and talent.

Just as Barb and Joe Yourczek (see the profile above) give back to their parish and to Resurrection Cemetery, so too do many others. Truly, we would not be able to host special events and Masses without the help of many individuals.

We are always looking for volunteers, for one-time or ongoing activities. Events like the five upcoming Memorial Day Masses require many hands. We also have behind-the-scenes opportunities.

If you have an interest and a few hours to give, please let us know. Go to our website, www.catholic-cemeteries.org and click on Contact Us. Or email us at info@catholic-cemeteries.org, or call 651-228-9991. Leave your contact information and we will get back to you. Thank you!
Gethsemane receives generous gift from Saint Thomas More parish

Last fall, Gethsemane Cemetery in New Hope received a beautiful altar and ambo, a gift from Saint Thomas More Catholic Community in St. Paul. Fr. Joseph Weiss, pastor at the parish, talked about how this generous gift, now used in the Gethsemane Chapel Mausoleum, came to be.

Where were these pieces previously used?
Fr. Weiss: These pieces are the original altar and ambo from Immaculate Heart of Mary Church in Saint Paul on Summit and Snelling Avenues. In 2008, the parishes of Immaculate Heart of Mary and Saint Luke (Summit and Lexington Avenues) united and became the new parish of Saint Thomas More Catholic Community.

During the first five years of the new parish both locations were used for liturgy. Then in June 2012, we moved to the East Campus Church (formerly Saint Luke) and closed the West Campus Church (formerly Immaculate Heart of Mary). We then removed the liturgical furnishings in the hope of finding a new home for their continued use in the Archdiocese.

Why the decision to donate them?
Fr. Weiss: We knew that these furnishings would not be used in our present location but wanted to honor their long time use in worship as well as the community that provided them. I have participated in Memorial Day Masses at The Catholic Cemeteries and I wondered if a new home of honor could be found in one of the cemeteries.

This idea gained momentum from our parishioners, who when asked, were very happy to think their altar and ambo would continue to be used in worship and in the sacred space of one of our Catholic Cemeteries. I contacted Sr. Fran Donnelly about the possibility and within a few months these beautiful pieces had a new home and an ongoing life serving the People of God for the celebration of the Eucharist.

What has been the reaction of parishioners to this donation?
Fr. Weiss: Saint Thomas More parishioners are very grateful and pleased about this gift to Gethsemane Cemetery. We consider it a privilege to contribute these liturgical furnishings to the local faith community of the Archdiocese of which we are members.

Our hope is to be able to schedule an annual visit to the cemetery as a parish community to celebrate Mass at this altar once again where we will remember members of our Saint Thomas More Community, our predecessors from Immaculate Heart of Mary, and all the dead who await Christ’s glorious return at Gethsemane Cemetery.

Q&A

Plaque honoring soldiers to be dedicated on Memorial Day

On Memorial Day 2015, the first of several memorial plaques will be dedicated at the base of Gethsemane Cemetery's flagpole. The series of bronze markers is a generous gift of Dan Ojeda of Minneapolis, who donated the flagpole to Gethsemane in 2005.

Entitled “Gallant Soldiers,” the first plaque to be installed features a tribute written by Ojeda, U.S. Army, Ret. In subsequent years, another plaque will be installed each Memorial Day through 2020.

“These memorials are intended to honor all who have served our nation since the Revolutionary War, both in the military and as civilians,” he said.

The Memorial Day dedication coincides with the 70th anniversary of the end of World War II, as well as the return of many soldiers from conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan.

For Ojeda, he hopes the flagpole plaza will serve as a place of remembrance of those who sacrificed for our country.

“This is my way of saying thank you to veterans and those who were behind the scenes at home,” he said.
Grave decorations for Memorial Day
During the days before and after Memorial Day, artificial flowers, potted plants, decorations and other ornaments are allowed. These types of decorations can be placed on graves beginning at noon on Thursday, May 21, and remain there until Sunday, May 31. Decorations should be removed by this date; otherwise, the cemetery staff will begin pickup on Monday, June 1. After that time, we request fresh-cut flowers only during the growing season.

Memorial Day flowers available for purchase
Over the Memorial Day weekend, a variety of floral bouquets will be available for purchase at Calvary, Gethsemane, Resurrection and St. Mary’s cemeteries. Flower stands will be located near the entrances of each cemetery while supplies last.

Recognizing veterans over Memorial Day weekend
Traditionally, before Memorial Day, a local Boy Scout troop and a veteran’s group place American flags on the gravestones provided by the Veterans Administration (VA), at Resurrection and Gethsemane cemeteries, respectively. For families visiting the graves of veterans not marked with a VA-provided gravestone, flags can be purchased for a minimal charge at the outdoor flower stands in both cemeteries. In addition, a limited supply will be available in the cemetery offices one week prior to Memorial Day.

Commemorating veterans, living and deceased
At each of the Memorial Day Masses, at all the cemeteries, The Catholic Cemeteries will offer a special recognition of and prayer for all veterans. Cards will be available to write the names of living and deceased veterans. The cards will be brought forward at the offertory and all will be remembered in the Mass intentions. Look for the tables and cards in or near the tents that are set up for Mass. There will be someone there to assist you. These cards will also be available in the cemetery offices the week before and during the Memorial Day weekend prior to Mass time on Memorial Day.