

**MEMORIAL DAY FIELD MASS
CALVARY CEMETERY
SPRINGFIELD, ILLINOIS**

Monday, May 30, 2011

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Bishop of Springfield in Illinois**

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ:

Today we celebrate a national holiday known as Memorial Day, originally called Decoration Day, a day of remembrance for those who have died in our nation's service. The origins of Memorial Day trace back over one hundred years to Civil War times, when the observance was first proclaimed officially on May 5, 1868 by General John Logan, national commander of the Grand Army of the Republic, and was observed on May 30, 1868, by placing flowers on the graves of Union and Confederate soldiers at Arlington National Cemetery. Traditional observance of Memorial Day has diminished over the years. Many Americans nowadays have forgotten the meaning and traditions of Memorial Day, regarding it only as a nice three-day weekend. Some people think the day is for honoring any and all dead, and not just those fallen in service to our country.

In our Catholic tradition, we honor all the dead on All Souls Day, November 2nd. Today we remember and pray for members of the military who died defending the values that we hold dear: liberty, justice and truth. Some of them, like my father, fought in World War II and were treated as heroes of the “greatest generation.” Others, such as our Vietnam War veterans, not only did not receive a hero’s reward, but even had to endure the scorn of ungrateful Americans. Even as we speak, more of our troops are dying in Iraq and Afghanistan without proper recognition of the sacrifices that they are making to help to bring democracy, liberty and security to that part of the world.

Since, in a sense, there is no recognition here on earth that is sufficient to honor our dead soldiers for their brave sacrifices, we might ask, what kind of reward awaits them in heaven? This question leads us to reflect on what awaits each one of us when we die.

My impression is that many people, including Christians who believe in God and believe in an afterlife, think that when we die, our bodies are buried or cremated, and we will live forever in heaven or hell as spirits, like angels. But that’s not what our Christian faith teaches.

Our Christian belief is that OUR BODIES will also be resurrected; *we too will be raised from the dead, like Jesus!* The Nicene Creed, adopted in 325, which we recite every Sunday as our Profession of Faith, concludes: “We look for the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come. Amen.” The Apostles’ Creed professes a belief in “the resurrection of the body.”

I first sensed that many Catholics did not believe this or at least did not understand it when I would preach about the resurrection of the body at funeral Masses. The facial expressions I got in response were often quizzical looks seeming to ask, “What is he talking about?” My suspicions were confirmed by a poll in which only 36 percent of the adults interviewed by the Scripps Survey Research Center at Ohio University said “yes” to the question: “Do you believe that, after you die, your physical body will be resurrected someday?” Fifty-four percent said they do not believe, and 10 percent were undecided. The number was only slightly higher for Catholics: 38 per cent of Roman Catholics said that they believe in a personal, physical resurrection.

This is significant since the resurrection of the body is one of the most important doctrines of the Christian faith. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* says, “We firmly believe, and hence we hope that, just as Christ is truly risen from the dead and lives forever, so after death the righteous will live forever with the risen Christ and He will raise them up on the last day. Our Resurrection, like His own, will be the work of the Most Holy Trinity” (#989).

Listening to people talk about the dead at wakes and funerals, there seems to be a belief among many Christians that only our spirits live on, that our souls leave our earthly bodies behind and we will continue only as spiritual beings, like angels (in heaven, or at least purgatory, for a time) or demons (in hell). This is true only to the extent that the state immediately after death is only temporary until the Last Day or the Second Coming when Christ will come in glory for the final judgment of all the living and the dead. When this happens, on a day that we do not know, our bodies will be resurrected in a glorified form.

Perhaps this disbelief or at least unfamiliarity with the resurrection of the dead is one of the reasons why more people are choosing to have their

bodies cremated after death. They seem to believe that our bodies are no longer important after death, so they can simply be discarded. While cremation is not forbidden for Catholics as long as it is not chosen to express denial in the belief of the resurrection of the body, burial of the body of the deceased in a cemetery is still the preferred practice. Why? If God has the power to resurrect our dead bodies, can't He raise them up even if they have been cremated? Certainly He can, but burial of the dead expresses our respect for the dignity of the human body and our hope in the resurrection of the body on the last day. Similarly, scattering the ashes of a cremated person is forbidden by the Catholic Church because it appears as way to demonstrate disbelief in the resurrection of the body. The cremated remains of the deceased are to be buried properly just like the bodies of the dead.

Visiting the graves of our departed loved ones is also a way to express our abiding love for them, to keep their memories alive in our hearts, and to pray for their eternal rest in God's kingdom.

Once at a Confirmation Mass I was preaching about the resurrection of the body and there was a young man confined to a wheelchair with a

severe disability that made his physical movement difficult. When I described our belief that our bodies will be raised up in a glorified form freed from our current weaknesses, diseases and physical limitations, the young man let out a cheer. Obviously, he understood and believes. Indeed, the resurrection of the body is something to cheer about!

Therefore, it is good that we are here at this cemetery beginning this Memorial Day celebration by celebrating the Eucharist, during which we give thanks to God for all those who gave their lives in the service of our country, and we pray that the Communion we share will unite us again in the glory of God's kingdom. When we receive Holy Communion, our bodies and souls are transformed by the Risen Body of Christ, and we look forward with joyful hope to the resurrection of our own bodies to live in the peace and unity of the heavenly kingdom of our Lord Jesus Christ. This is the promise made by our Savior Himself: "Be glad and rejoice, for your reward in heaven is great."

May God give us this grace. Amen.