

Traveling Companion: On the graves of my ancestors

Fr. Michael Tracey

Every year, while on vacation, I engage in a very special tradition. On August 15th I celebrate Mass for the people I grew up with. I don't celebrate it in a regular church but in the ruins of the original church which was built centuries earlier.

At 7 p.m., while the evening sun is still high in the sky as it make it way to set in the west, I gather with the people of the area. Neighbors come from near and far to celebrate the Feast of the Assumption of Mary in a very special way.

Some men erect a makeshift altar by the ruined gable of the old church. Strings of ivy wax their way through the stoned gable while an ash tree provides a canopy over the altar area.

I make my way across the narrow gateway and walk gingerly among the many stones that lie half buried in this sacred ground. I survey the crowd. I see many of the same faces I see there every year. While I vest, they chat and visit while holidaying school children enjoy each other's company again. Some elderly people sit on chairs while others lean on walls that are robust. Soon, it is time for Mass to begin. Some of the choir members break into song, singing a familiar Marian hymn. Others join in.

Perched high on the altar platform, I begin with the sign of the cross. Everyone blesses themselves. I think of the thousands of time that same sign of the cross was make in centuries past. It reminds me, not only of the relationship of God as Trinity, but also of my relationship with these people among whom I grew up. It also connects me with my own past, my own fore bearers in the faith.

I think about the worshippers in this cemetery and former parish church. I begin to realize that part of them is buried amid these stones. If only these stones could talk, what would they say? Annie Dillard would not need to teach these stones to talk. They already speak volumes by their presence and their silence witness.

Buried beneath these stones on hallowed ground are two kinds of people. Some are young and some are old. According to tradition and the then church practice, decades ago, children who died prematurely or prior to being baptized, lie here. I know some of the families whose sons and daughters, brothers and sisters are buried here. I look out and see, just inside the wall where a stone marks the burial place of an uncle of mine, who died in childbirth. The stone that marks the spot came from one of my ancestors fields.

The others who are buried here were victims of the Famine in the mid-1840's. They died of the Great Hunger by roadsides, in fields and empty homes. Their great silence still echoes through the unnamed stones as they face heavenward. Hopefully, now, they enjoy food-a-plenty in the great eternal banquet hall.

As the Mass continues, I am conscious I am celebrating it on the altar of a new Catacombs. Like the Eucharistic Prayer reminds me, we join with the angels, saints and martyrs. Now, they are not people from some distant past in the Church. They are flesh and blood, real angels, saints and martyrs. They too, have won their crown of glory by their innocence and their martyrdom of hunger.

Our final gesture at the end of Mass is to bless the people and the graves of our ancestors with holy water. The living bless themselves as the swig of holy water is directed their way. The others, lying gently below the stones and sods, acknowledge our blessings, prayers and connections with them from their lofty thrones in heaven.

We close our celebration with "Hail Holy Queen," a memorable farewell and acknowledgement to the one whose "yes" to God allows our hungry dead and innocent angels to rise from their graves. We leave the graves of our ancestors in appreciation and with renewed faith and hope.