

## To Know Our Dead

### *An Architectural Proposal for a New Socialization of Death, Burial, and Mourning for the Modern American Catholic Church*

MASTER'S THESIS

by

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#### ***A Note to the Reader:***

During the two years I worked on this project, I was asked more times than I can count: how did you get into the study of a Catholic death? The answer is very simple in my mind:

I was educated in the Catholic School System. I can recall every childhood classmate who has lost a parent while in school because I attend that parent's funeral: in uniform, with the rest of my class, sitting in the back left or right corner of the church. We attended because the nuns made it perfectly clear that we were Catholic and attendance is never optional.

Being Catholic means that you cannot just make a phone call, watch it on television, or express emotion on Facebook. To be Catholic requires showing up and doing the work of the liturgy every Sunday. And with equal importance, actually being present for those special sacramental occasions which celebrate life and death.

Post-Vatican II Catholic architecture has forgotten how to make spaces that allow for the work of the liturgy. Knowing our dead and our rising from the dead is part of the very fabric of Catholicism. Re-intertwining the fabric of our Catholic life and death is the work, in stone and wood, I set out to do and to make visible as an example of what Catholic life and architecture could be in this century and the ones to come.

#### ***Abstract:***

In the 20th and 21st century, the dead have been lost. In centuries before the modern past, the dead were clearly and firmly located via societal or religious ritual in a physical place within the consciousness fabric of the community. In the mid-19th century, Americans stopped an innately human way of burying the dead due to psychological fears that likened death to a sickness and viewed our proximity to death as a path to our own demise. Pushing death to the outskirts of the city was not merely a change in the urban fabric, but represented a profound and detrimental shift in society's attitudes towards death.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The psychology of this thinking is expressed by Sigmund Freud and Ernest Becker. For her part, Penny Coleman discusses the mid-19th century Clean Cemetery Movement and this thinking is further proven by the time period legislation such as the Rural Cemetery Act of 1847 in New York State. Ratzinger also discusses this when he writes of the work done by Josef Pieper in the mid-20th century. Pieper documented the lack of the word 'death' in newspapers of the time.

My research is concerned with what it means to die and be remembered in the modern Catholic Church. The Church provides us with the beautiful structure of the funerary ritual that plays the dual purpose of standardizing our public actions and helps in locating the dead among the dead and the living among the living. First, this research will continue to investigate how modernity and ritual can act together in a place to reach and serve the multi-generational Church community. And second, what part the practice of entombing deceased's remains on the parish landscape can play, in modern times, in keeping the dead integrated with the community.

The location of the dead, vis-a-vis the location of the remains of the deceased, is highly important for the process of mourning. In looking historically at the American burial process one can see that the pre-modern or antebellum funerary services offer the mourners

and the whole community more of a connection to each other. These older processes were instinctively human, ritualized circumstances that recognized human connections are made through the body. These burial processes connect the living to the dead via the body by which they were intimately connected.

The Roman Catholic Church also recognizes the importance of the body by weekly professing a belief in the Resurrection of the Dead.<sup>2</sup> At the end of time, the Lord will come again and raise from the dead the bodies of all the faithfully departed. The rituals surrounding death provide that great care is taken of the body, in recognition that the body and the soul carry a memory of each other,<sup>3</sup> and the rituals also provide a way for the family to ritualize their grief.

The belief in the Resurrection of the Dead, though stated weekly, is not currently expressed in the funerary architecture of the Church. American Catholics allow their funerary architecture to make the statement that burial places are no longer the collection of our community's dead, as old churchyard cemeteries were, but a necessary memorialization of every deceased individual because these memorializations become "the only trace, in the end, of our existence in the world."<sup>4</sup> Whether, this is a subconscious fear or a fact absolutely refute, it is problematic that a church with such strong beliefs about the Resurrection of the Body and immortality of the soul allows its architecture to make this statement. Could the re-introduction of burial structures onto the parish landscape bring about an understanding of the interconnectedness of all Christian peoples, despite death, as understood before modernity and the Americanization of death? For the Church, it is necessary that she no longer promotes funerary architecture that leads to the production of individual monuments. In the Catholic tradition, internment of remains should foremost be concerned with respect for those remains as a temple of the Holy Spirit and saving them for the Resurrection of the Body at the end of time.

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<sup>2</sup> This belief is professed towards the end of the part of the Mass called the Liturgy of the Word. It is during the Liturgy of the Word that the Nicene Creed is typically spoken as the Profession of Faith. The last two lines of the Nicene Creed read, "and I look forward to the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come." But the Apostle's Creed can also be spoken; the last two lines are "[I believe in] the resurrection of the body, and life everlasting. And lastly a restatement of the baptismal promises can be spoken. In this form the celebrant asks the congregation: "Do you believe in... the resurrection of the body, and life everlasting?"

<sup>3</sup> (Ratzinger 1988), 74

<sup>4</sup> (Foucault 2005), 354