

## **The Gardens of Ordinary Times**

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By Lucia A. Silecchia

Years ago, a child in my family asked, “*If a Church is God’s house, is a cemetery God’s garden?*” I lack the theologically correct answer. Yet, that question recognized what I know is true: there is something profoundly sacred about the land where we lay our loved ones to rest.

This month of All Saints and All Souls seems a better time than ever to admit that I cherish long walks in peaceful cemeteries. In recent years, some of those I loved most have been lowered into earth’s embrace, So, more often than before, I take walks through a hilly hometown cemetery in Queens N.Y.– a holy place that seems, paradoxically, very much alive.

I have met a musician who plays bagpipes at the graves of his loved ones. He asked without words if it would disturb me if he continued to play. Without words, I assured him it would not. Bagpipe melodies are a perfect soulful soundtrack for this garden.

I have seen an elderly man carrying plants and gardening gear as he walks alone. Is he tending the grave of a wife with whom he walked through life? A father killed in a long ago war? A child who never grew old? I did not ask. I left him to his loved ones as he left me to mine, with the peaceful serenity of knowing this garden gives us both a place to remember and pray.

I once saw a small boy innocently take a pumpkin adorning the grave of a stranger and reverently move it to his grandfather’s grave. Later, the pumpkin was returned to its rightful place. Yet, my heart rejoiced to see that death did not end this young child’s impulse to shower his grandfather with tangible tokens of his love.

At the grave of my own grandparents, I planted geraniums for my grandmother. But, as a gag gift to my grandfather – an Italian farm boy who believed soil was best used for growing food -- I planted a small sprig of basil as a private joke between us. This did not remain private as the basil plant thrived and unsubtly towered over the flowers blooming below. The sweet scent of this basil brought gratitude for times when that same scent filled my grandfather’s gardens long ago.

I have seen gardeners and gravediggers laboring through all types of weather to tend this blessed land. I hope that they know both what a profound responsibility they have and how much the living appreciate it when they care for the dead with such dignity and love.

I have passed graves with familiar names: the parents of my friends; the friends of my parents; neighbors I knew for years; religious sisters who taught in my schools; and, now, some peers of my own.

Most graves I pass belong to those who were strangers. Yet, here, they do not seem that way. The brief words on their gravestones are an invitation to pray for them – in a way that I hope strangers may one day pray for me. There are graves that were dug far too soon for those who died years younger than I am – and I pray with gratitude for the years I have. There are graves

freshly dug and still unmarked, where grief is fresh and raw – and I pray that those who mourn know comfort and care. There are graves of those who died many decades ago that are still adorned with fresh flowers – and I pray with hope that, especially in November, those who have long passed from this life will always be remembered with the gift of prayer.

There are the graves marked with such simple words as “beloved wife,” “cherished father,” “dear nonna,” “loving daughter,” “baby son,” and “dearest friend,” – and I pray that the lifetimes of love so imperfectly captured by these words are someday perfected in lifetimes that do not end. There are graves that have only a name and a date engraved on them. If these are graves of those who walked alone through life without family or friends, I pray that they now know the joy of communion beyond this life.

It is at the graves of my own parents that this garden seems most sacred and holy – a sentiment likely shared by all who wend their way to the graves where the names are most familiar. I see the days of their births and remember to be grateful for the gifts of their lives. I see the days of their deaths and remember that grief with far too much detail and mourn for what I have lost – for now. It is here where it is easiest to pray for them, in the hope that their lives have merely changed and not ended, and in hope that we will meet again.

The bond between us and those who have gone before us is one that is deep, profound, and beyond my ability to grasp. So, I am grateful, in November more than ever, for the ways our cemeteries connect me to them in a way that is real and tangible. I pray for the blessing of seeing them again. Until then, I am grateful for sacred cemeteries – the gardens where God comforts us through our ordinary times.

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