



## **Most Reverend Raymond J. Boland**

**Bishop Emeritus**

**Diocese Kansas City ~ St. Joseph**

### **"Hope Springs Eternal"**

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I am grateful to the leadership of the NCCC for inviting me to address you this morning and you should be grateful to my valued Director of Cemeteries, Father Robert Cameron, for persuading me to do so. Then, remembering that my father's name was "John J" and my mother's name was "O'Brien" and discovering that the combination perfectly matched the name of your current President provided me with an uncanny coincidence which means absolutely nothing other than giving me a totally useless introduction to this talk!

I am well aware that the theme you selected for your Convention this year, REMEMBRANCE, PRAYER AND HOPE, was inspired by and is in many ways an anniversary commemoration of the tragedy which was visited upon the United States and shocked the world in the early hours of Tuesday, September 11, 2001.

For most of us the memories are still fresh because the miracles of the electronic age have made it possible to behold and to relive those terrible minutes when evil reigned and thousands died. The images of a blue sky, silver planes and the redness of flaming fire is the stuff of which recurring nightmares are fashioned. It is all too easy to remember even though we would like to forget. And then there was the colorless aftermath - the rubble, the twisted beams, the gaunt misshapen piles of debris, the smoke and the omnipresent dust - layers of dust entombing those who had died, one vast funeral pyre of smoldering embers which too would die but only very slowly. Again, it is all too easy to remember even though we would like to forget.

Prayer was a natural response to such a catastrophe. But the prayer was not always the kind we associate with undiluted praise of a loving God. In many cases it was demanding and questioning. God was put on trial. Where was he? Why did he allow this to happen? The person of faith was clearly puzzled. Once again, the age-old contest between good and evil was front and center and, for one brief moment, evil seemed to have secured the higher ground. Then the churches and the temples and the mosques began to fill and in our helplessness and our confusion and our sorrow, in the realization that only he could help us, we laid aside the little gods of our daily routines, and sought re-acquaintance with the One who mattered - or, at least, most of us did.

I have commented on both "remembrance" and "prayer" briefly because, in this unforgettable event, they gave birth to the concept and the reality of "hope". Hope always needs a context. Hope is the finding, or for many, the rediscovery of God in the aftermath of what happened on that fateful September 11<sup>th</sup>. Hope does not imply that we now understand all that took place, or why it took place, with blinding clarity. Hope does not mean that we no longer shake our heads in questioning disbelief when we gaze upon that gaping hole in the cityscape of lower Manhat-

tan. What it does mean is that we are, albeit gradually, accepting a relationship with our God where we embrace him as someone more than an unseen "world mechanic" who is supposed to keep everything running smoothly - always, of course, for our comfort and benefit!

As Christians our theology provides us with a firm foundation for the virtue of hope. Let me borrow the most recent official formulation from the Catechism of the Catholic Church published in its second edition in 1997. This will remind you of your schooldays. "Hope", we are told, "is the theological virtue by which we desire the Kingdom of heaven and eternal life as our happiness, placing our trust in God's promises and relying not on our own strength, but on the help of the grace of the Holy Spirit. (#1817)

This definition is supported by two quotations from the scriptures. The writer of the letter to the Hebrews (Heb 10:23) urges us to "hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful." The second affirmation is provided by St. Paul in his letter to Titus (Titus 3:6-7) "The Holy Spirit," he asserts, "..... (is) poured out upon us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that we might be justified by his grace and become heirs in hope of eternal life."

I know that the further development of the theological virtue of hope could be intellectually rewarding but equally sleep-inducing so I am going to resist that temptation. Those of you who are so interested will find many learned tomes on this topic authored by the Fathers and the theologians of the Church.

Still, it is not my intention to neglect or set aside the theological virtue just described. That would be impossible because the linkages between our daily human experiences and the virtue are too many and too strong to be ignored. It will constantly ignite our mental processes as we struggle to understand and overcome the challenges which constantly pull us towards the two extremes which are the enemies of hope, namely, despair and presumption. And, in passing, let me say that these are the extremes - there are many intermediate stages which can disrupt our equilibrium. And, guess what?--- practically nobody is immune from these gyrations which pull us between cowardice and courage, between a desire to hide and a desire to lead, between the need for reassurance and the assurance of being needed.

One of the most important realities of hope is that it came with humanity. It did not have to await the articulation of revelation. God implanted this ability in that portion of his creation which we identify as *homo sapiens*. Even the new Catechism recognizes this. It maintains (#1818) that "the virtue of hope responds to the aspiration to happiness which God has placed in the heart of every man,..." It goes on to say that, "it keeps man from discouragement" and "it sustains him during times of abandonment..." I would like to add to this my conviction that hope enables man to dream. In Theology 101 we used to say that "grace builds on nature" and hope provides us with a perfect example of that adage. It seems that those of our ancestors who lived in caves could hope for a better tomorrow, for landscapes free of carnivorous beasts, for foods from the forest which wouldn't sicken them and a million other inclinations. Hope was necessary to spur inventiveness, to encourage the primitive mind to observe, to experiment, to forage, to travel, and to remember. Many eons ago there must have been a moment in time when man realized that he, living in an environment populated by denizens far more powerful than he was, could hope and, despite tragedy and disaster, that hope provided him with a unique weapon to gain mastery over all aspects of creation. Millennia later the Greek myth about Pandora's Box illustrates this realization. Briefly, Prometheus stole fire from heaven and gave it to mortals. Zeus was mad and set out to counteract the blessing. He commissioned

Pandora to be fashioned from earth and the gods bestowed multiple gifts upon her: she was given beauty, a human voice, great cunning, the art of flattery and the power of seduction. She possessed a box containing all kinds of misery and evil. The box was opened and these evils were released to torment the world but the box was slammed shut before hope could escape. Even the ancient Greeks knew that hope was necessary to counteract the frustrations and disappointments of a troubled life. In some ways Pandora became what the French would call the classic *femme fatale* or Hollywood the subject of "Fatal Attraction." By the way, there doesn't seem to be any linguistic connection between the bride-to-be's Hope Chest and Pandora's Box but an unlucky husband may think otherwise!

I gave this talk the title, HOPE SPRINGS ETERNAL. It is, of course, part of a quotation. In my first year in College I had a professor who was besotted by the English poet, Alexander Pope. (Years later, in ecclesiastical history, I had to cultivate an interest in Pope Alexander!) Alexander Pope (1688-1744) was a Catholic at a time when being a Catholic in England was not too popular. Although his literary stature was somewhat neglected during the nineteenth century it was rehabilitated during the following decades and is today acknowledged as one of the finest writers of his era. One of his most profound poems was his "Essay on Man" wherein he makes his observation about hope.

*Hope springs eternal in the human breast;  
Man never Is, but always To be blest:  
The soul, uneasy and confin'd from home,  
Rests and expatiates in a life to come. (Epistle I, 1733)*

Pope expresses his firm belief in the immortality of man but he also sees the value of hope in the lesser day-to-day affairs of mundane living. This thought is shared by the world's greatest thinkers in every culture and in every language. Indeed the ranks of avowed nihilists are amazingly thin. They don't sponsor many conventions!

In his great voyage of discovery as he faced a mutinous crew, Christopher Columbus wrote in his Journal of the First Voyage that "he cheered them as best he could holding out good hope of the advantages they would have." (Journal, October 10, 1492, abstract by Bartolom' de Las Casas).

Robert Louis Stevenson (1850-94) wrote, "Hope deserts us at no period of our existence. From first to last, and in the face of smarting disillusion, we continue to expect good fortune, better health and better conduct, and that so confidently that we judge it needless to deserve them."

In his farewell address when he left Springfield, Illinois for the last time in February, 1861, Abraham Lincoln, knowing the daunting task facing his presidency, placed himself under the protection and guidance of God, "Trusting in Him who can go with me... let us confidently hope that all will yet be well."

The statesman and noted orator, Winston Churchill, in many ways the savior of the British people during the Second World War, probably gave his greatest graduation address in his declining years when he struggled to the podium, waited for the inevitable silence his presence always commanded, and then thundered forth just seven words, "Never, never give up! Never give up!" Those who were present never forgot these words, so much in keeping with the leader who had faced disaster again and again during his illustrious career. This was in June of 1965: a few months later he was dead.

Let me draw your attention to a very recent literary reflection on the meaning of life. I refer to Mitch Albom's "Tuesdays with Morrie," which retained its place on the New York Times Best-Seller List for over three years. You may recall the scenario. The author, a sports journalist, heard that one of his college professors, Morrie Schwartz, was dying of ALS, popularly known as Lou Gehrig's disease. Mitch resolved to take one more course from him by visiting him every Tuesday to listen to his wisdom about living and dying. Ted Koppel of Nightline covered his story for TV and after one interview he complimented the exhausted Morrie. Here is the dialogue (page 163).

*"You did a good job," Koppel said.*

*Morrie smiled weakly. "I gave you what I had," he whispered.*

*"You always do."*

*"Ted, this disease is knocking at my spirit. It'll get my body. It will not get my spirit."*

*Koppel was near tears. "You done good."*

*"You think so?" Morrie rolled his eyes toward the ceiling. "I'm bargaining with Him up there now. I'm asking Him, "Do I get to be one of the angels?"*

The author concluded this chapter with the simple observation: "It was the first time Morrie admitted talking to God."

I mention this because it illustrates the reality of hope so graphically in two dimensions. The human dimension, *"it will not get my spirit."* The theological dimension, *"I'm bargaining with God....."*

Later on, in the same book (page 170) there is another little incident which should be of special interest to this audience. Morrie confided to his young friend that he had picked a place to be buried. He adds.

*"You'll come to my grave? To tell me your problems?"*

*My problems?*

*"Yes."*

*And you'll give me answers?*

*"I'll give you what I can. Don't I always?"*

*I picture his grave, on the hill, overlooking the pond, some little nine foot piece of earth where they will place him, cover him with dirt, put a stone on top. Maybe in a few weeks? Maybe in a few days? I see myself sitting there alone, arms across my knees, staring into space.*

*It won't be the same, I say, not being able to hear you talk.*

*"Ah, talk..."*

*"Tell you what. After I'm dead, you talk. And I'll listen."*

You talk and I'll listen - these words need no further explanation.

As Catholics we believe that the Scriptures are the word of God. We may not always advert to the fact that the Holy Spirit moved the human authors to provide us with a literature of hope. It may be spiritually productive to keep this in mind when we meditate on the sacred texts. This is especially true when we, or others who depend on us, are experiencing depression, sadness, rejection or grief.

The entire Old Testament or, as some prefer to call it, the Hebrew Scriptures, describes a long

period of hopeful expectation in waiting for the Redeemer Messiah. Evil stalks its pages but God always comes to the rescue. Eden is lost but a virgin - mother is promised to nurture a redeeming Adam. Noah is given the means to save humankind from the Flood. Moses is raised up to thwart the Egyptians whose vaunted power is destroyed in the surging waters of the Red Sea. Goliath is felled by the youthful David. Even the whale is prevailed upon to disgorge the helpless Jonah and Daniel survives the lions' den. In the providence of God hopeless situations are anything but.

As should be expected with the arrival of the Redeemer, hope is generated by his every miracle and teaching. Each one of the sacraments, his gift to his community we call Church, is permeated with hope.

*"He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood will have everlasting life."*

*"Is there anyone sick among you? Let him bring in the priests of the Church... and the prayer of faith will save the sick man..."*

*" Whose sins you shall forgive, they are forgiven them..."*

And, in other contexts,

*"Ask and you shall receive."*

*"If I but touch the hem of his garment, I will be cured..."*

Hope brings the Centurion and Nicodemus and the lepers and the good thief to Jesus.

We might even say that, unworthy though it was, hope inspired the mother of James and John to ask for a special favor.

The parables of the Lord provide the greatest consolation for those whom the world ignores, whose names never make the headlines, ordinary decent people who often go through life unheralded and unsung. They make up that throng of people who are the sowers of the seed, the returning prodigals, and the good Samaritans. They have hope because Jesus assured them that those whose only prayer is a plea for mercy are making an acceptable preparation for the Kingdom. The inevitable prize for the sincere ponderer of every parable is the gift of hope.

In this regard I would highly recommend a series of vignettes published by the *New York Times* over a period of 15 weeks. They are not obituaries, just miniature profiles of so many of the victims of September 11. You won't have to search for old newspapers as they are now collected in book form under the title *PORTRAITS OF GRIEF 9/11/01*. Allow me to quote the words of Howell Raines of the *Times* as he introduces the long list of people, just like us, whose only claim to notability is that they happened to be at the wrong place at the wrong time.

*But "Portraits of Grief" reminds us of the democracy of death, an event that lies in the future of every person on the planet. The scary force of that universal fact sometimes inspires in the most sober soul an impulse to flee into a carpe diem mood of headlong hedonism. I think, however, that the 1,910 stories reported in our paper and collected here in Portraits 9/11/01 stir an entirely different feeling. When I read them, I am filled with an awareness of the subtle nobility of everyday existence, of the ordered beauty of quotidian life for millions of Americans, of the unforced dedication with which our fellow citizens go about their duties as parents, life partners, employers or employees, as planters of community gardens, coaches of the young, joyful explorers of this great land*

*and the world beyond its shores. These lives, bundled together so randomly into a union of loving memory by those terrible cataclysms of September 11, remind us of what Walt Whitman knew: "The United States themselves are essentially the greatest poem."*

I combed the literature about September 11 in the weeks which followed the disaster. The best has been published in various collections of homilies, sermons, prayers and reflective pieces. More are yet to come. I am appending a brief bibliography to my notes if anybody is so interested. The unexpectedness and the shock and the magnitude of the devastation coupled with the terrible loss of life spurred the creativity of our religious leaders. By and large they rose to the occasion. It was a challenging task to say something which would mean something to a grieving nation and especially to those families whose integrity was shattered beyond comprehension. I detected two themes which seemed to dominate the thoughts and the counsel of those who grappled with the overwhelming tragedy. They all acknowledged the terrible power of unleashed evil in our midst, the merciless savagery which will forever stand as a mockery of civilized behavior, the devastation and loss of life which may have exceeded even the wildest dreams of the participating perpetrators and yet they all concluded that God was still in charge and that love and goodness and faith and hope would triumph over the worst that evil could accomplish. Indeed, when the initial shock was absorbed the reaction set in. Yes, there was anger and, most would say, a justified anger but I am referring to the veritable tidal wave of sympathy, care and concern which engulfed the survivors and galvanized not only Americans but even those overseas, some of whom could be thought of as alien to all the United States represents.

The second insight is no less important and it expresses the essence of our hope. It is the profound realization that there is no evil, no matter how extensive or devastating, from which God cannot fashion goodness. Let me quote for you the words of the Reverend John R. Claypool, an episcopal priest who had been invited to preach in a Presbyterian Church in Atlanta, Georgia a few days after September 11<sup>th</sup>.

*"God," he said, "has the incredible ingenuity to take things and mysteriously bring good out of them. I ask you, is there any reality more needed just now than access to this kind of hope? September 11 of this year will go down in history as a true watershed in our national saga."*

Later on, in the same sermon, he, in turn, quotes a fourteenth-century mystic who maintained that,

*"All the evil that human beings here ever conceived or done is no more to the mercy of God than a live coal is to the sea." (Restoring Faith, pages 127-8)*

This concept is, of course, profoundly scriptural, the resurrection after the crucifixion, redemption after rejection, or, as Peter so intimately experienced it, love after betrayal. It is also the basis and the substance of our hope. Indeed one of the books previously mentioned is entitled A REASON FOR HOPE.

And our grief and our hope are not confined to mere words. On an earlier visit to Canada this year I was not surprised to discover that the choreographer Brian Macdonald was busy putting together a ballet entitled "Requiem 9/11" featuring a cast of 104 dancers and singers and taking its musical cues from Verdi's "Requiem Mass." I understand it had its full premiere in Ottawa about two weeks ago. It does not spare us the horrors of what happened or the paralyzing aftermath of desperation and death but all this is put in its place in the finale, as indeed

Verdi himself expressed it with such force, by an affirmation of life and hope which destroys our despondency. Our pain of loss is vanquished by the strength of our hope.

We know all of this. Our challenge is to live it, day after unrelenting day.

Our lives are literally littered with little acts of hope. Crossing the street, boarding a jet plane, purchasing a lottery ticket, signing a mortgage, getting married, having a family and shouting at the quarterback, as the clock nears zero, to try one last "Hail Mary" pass! Hope is living and living is hope and most of us can handle it most of the time. Those few who cannot, unfortunately, end up as recluses afraid of their own shadows. Is this the meaning of the old proverb that cowards die many times, the brave just once? Hope can be abused - the inveterate gambler, the "double or nothing man," becomes a candidate for Gamblers Anonymous when he steps beyond the point of no return or, in his case, one should say "no returns."

We must never forget that hope is always grounded in reality. Only the user of psychedelic drugs thinks that he can fly or walk on water.

A meditation on the concept of hope is a value in itself. We need it to focus and even, sometimes, to refocus our lives. We need to align our strivings with that promise of immortality which is our destiny. This is a statement which is extremely easy to make. It smacks of good common sense, almost a self-evident truth. Why, then, does it turn out to be so difficult in practice? How do we allow ourselves to get bogged down in side issues, inconsequential events, dead ends and repetitious detours? Who knows? It happens. And what is worse - we are no sooner rescued from the quicksand when we step right back into it again! In artistic terms hope is symbolized by an anchor. You and I know that a ship does not carry an anchor merely for purposes of decoration. It is there to serve a purpose; when deployed to keep the ship steady despite the swirlings of tides and winds. It plays no less a task when transposed into human experience.

I am not sure that one can forge an indispensable linkage between hope and your profession as Catholic cemeterians. Nevertheless, there are some peripheral connections which may be worth a brief mention. We must not forget that your very vocation, engaged, as you are, in the corporal work of mercy of burying the dead, is, in itself, a service of hope. The care, the respect, the ritual with which you treat the body of the deceased, along with the comforting professionalism you offer the bereaved, is a statement of hope. You reflect those pertinent words of the Mass Preface, "life is changed, not ended."

Paragraph 7 of the General Introduction to the *Order of Christian Funerals* gives us a brief summary which can readily serve as an examination of conscience. It reads:

*The celebration of the Christian funeral brings hope and consolation to the living. While proclaiming the Gospel of Jesus Christ and witnessing to Christian hope in the resurrection, the funeral rites also recall to all who take part in them God's mercy and judgment and meet the human need to turn always to God in times of crisis.*

In other words, in moments of sadness for so many of those who will be gathered around the casket, we have to be sure that everything we say and do is reflective of that hope which is inherent to our faith, that our resurrection is as certain as the one which made all the difference and took place from a borrowed tomb two millennia ago. For us it may be just another funeral: it may be spiritually more salutary to think of it as a prelude to our own.

In your profession you are no less ministers than the priest or the deacon. Your role may be different but it is a genuine ministry and all of us are aware that there is no more mind-dulling or soul-destroying ingredient than the boredom of routine. Nourishment - spiritual nourishment - is the only answer and, no doubt, many of you have developed an inner repository of prayerful strength which bolsters spiritual growth. Surely the thirteenth and the fourteenth stops on the Via Dolorosa - the Stations of the Cross - are patronal images for all those associated with the burying of our sacred dead. Can you identify your feelings with those of the Mother who received the broken body of her son from the cross, the Pietà, and the little group that received the privilege of placing him in the tomb? You place many Christs in many tombs every working day.

Some years ago I had reason to become reacquainted with Celtic Spirituality, a prayer methodology currently undergoing something of a renaissance. Basically, Celtic Spirituality is considered to be what resulted when Patrick's conversion process Christianized the older but deeply religious customs and practices of the Celts who had settled in Ireland and were served by a priestly caste known as druids. The genius of Patrick's evangelization was his ability to win allegiance to Christ without destroying the old order. This may be reason why Hibernia, or Scotia, the Roman or Latin names for Ireland, was converted without bloodshed. Druidic religious rites were dominated by the observable cycles of nature, the regularity of the seasons, the mysteries surrounding the long days of summer and the short days of winter and the significance they attached to the basics such as earth, sky, fire and water. For them the concepts of life and death were always intertwined and those of you with an interest in Catholic liturgy will be conscious of many similarities. Father John O'Donohue, considered by many the foremost guru of the revival of curiosity about Celtic Spirituality, in his well-known book ANAM CARA (literally, the Gaelic, SOUL FRIEND) has this to say which illustrates my point:

*There is a presence who walks the road of life with you. This presence accompanies your every moment. It shadows your every thought and feeling. On your own, or with others, it is always there with you. When you were born, it came out of the womb with you; with the excitement at your arrival, nobody noticed it. Though this presence surrounds you, you may still be blind to its companionship. The name of this presence is death." (Chap. 6, page 243)*

He includes in the same book a prayer entitled A BLESSING FOR DEATH and although you will notice that it is permeated with a Christian outlook nowhere is there a specific mention of God or Christ. I doubt if we could quibble with any of the sentiments expressed in this prayer of blessing. It is a hymn to life as it also is an acknowledgment of the reality of a death which is not the end but merely the stepping stone to a welcome in another home.

#### A Blessing for Death

*I pray that you will have the blessing  
of being consoled and sure about your  
own death.  
May you know in your soul that there is no need  
to be afraid.  
When your time comes, may you be given every  
blessing and shelter that you need.  
May there be a beautiful welcome for you in the  
home that you are going to.*

*You are not going somewhere strange. You are  
going back to the home that you never left.  
May you have a wonderful urgency to live your  
life to the full.  
May you live compassionately and creatively  
and transfigure everything that is negative  
within you and about you.  
When you come to die may it be after a long life.  
May you be peaceful and happy and in the  
presence of those who really care for you.  
May your going be sheltered and your welcome assured.  
May your soul smile in the embrace of your  
anam cara. (Chap. 6, page 278)*

These reflections are designed to inculcate an attitude of hope not only to bolster ourselves spiritually but also to be compassionate companions of consolation for those who come to us when grief and the emptiness of loss dominates their thinking.

Let me make a few observations about the place, the final resting place to which we bring our loved ones - for you, the cemetery, the mausoleum or the columbarium. It is a sacred place and it should be a symbol of hope. You don't have to be an expert in the burial customs of by-gone civilizations to know this. What is the lesson of the pyramids? Have you ever tried to get permission to put a highway through a Native American burial site? Ground Zero will not be redeveloped without serious consideration and probably much argument about how best to commemorate the hundreds who were incinerated or vaporized in the Twin Towers and whose bodies were never recovered. This is their only sacred ground, their final resting place, the focus for those who want to look and to remember. Place is vitally important.

The medieval Irish monks were very particular about where they would establish their monastic settlements. Knowing that they would live and die in the selected spot they wandered, sometimes for years, in search of what they called "a place of resurrection," their chosen place of prayer would also be, in time, their cemetery.

Many of the poets are our popular philosophers. It is remarkable how many of them, in their writings, preselected their resting places. To give just one example, Thomas Davis, the Irish nationalist poet, had this to say about where he wished to wait for eternity. For some reason he was answering the question, "*Shall they bury me under the shade of cathedral domes?*" (You probably thought that this question was only the prerogative of cardinals and archbishops!)

*"Oh, no - no cathedral," he said.  
"... on an Irish green hill-side,  
On an opening lawn - but not too wide;  
For I love the drip of the wetted trees -  
I love not the gales, but a gentle breeze,  
To freshen the turf...."*

He said absolutely nothing about perpetual care!

I have always been opposed to scattering ashes on golf courses, in bingo parlors, from moving trains or in the local creek not, let me add, because it cuts into your business, but because I

strongly believe that the identification of the deceased with a specific and reverent sacred place is a major ingredient of the healing process. It doesn't change the impact of loss but it restores some element of continuing stability. It helps with what the psychologists call closure and maybe it is more illustrative of what we theologically term "the Communion of Saints."

May I ask that we pay particular attention to the architectural beauty of our cemeteries. I am well aware of the economics involved which have dictated acres of level manicured grass swards with few allowances for the expression of individuality. By saying this I am not advocating a return to the rustic moss-covered Celtic crosses which have more in common with the leaning tower of Pisa than the holy rood on which Christ died. Surely our cemeteries can be efficiently plotted and maintenance friendly without totally abandoning attractive entrances, appropriate shrines with seasonally-changed and colorful flower gardens, quality sculptural pieces and scriptural passages amid groves of carefully designed vegetation. Am I too much of an idealist to advocate a place where birds sing and a lake where swans can glide and ducks splash? Unless our cemeteries are places of welcome for the living as well as the dead then they may not qualify as places of hope. And let's be prepared to pay our architects for more imaginative and what I would call catechetically-challenging mausoleums and columbaria. They don't all have to look like something more attuned to the Post Office, an unadorned never-ending series of mailboxes. Again, I understand that an appeal to simplicity can best serve efficiency and economic factors but maybe there is a happy medium between clinical austerity and baroque over-embellishment.

Allow me to ask an impertinent question. Is there an unwritten law that people may not sit in cemeteries? The vast majority of those arriving for burial each day are elderly. Those who visit gravesites tend to be elderly, especially widows and widowers. Would it be a cardinal sin to place more benches in our cemeteries so that visitors may sit down, rest their aging bones, ponder the beauty and the silence and the meaning of the place, say their rosaries and generally meditate on the human pilgrimage from life to life by way of death. Hope resides therein.

God would not be God and he wouldn't have created us in his own image and likeness if he didn't endow us with the ability to hope.

John Henry Cardinal Newman prayed that when his *"work was done"* and the *"fever of life was over,"* the Lord would grant him, *"a safe lodging, and a holy rest, and peace at the last."*

Sir Walter Raleigh penned his own concept of hope:

*"When we have wandered all our ways,  
Shuts up the story of our days:  
And from which earth, and grave, and dust,  
The Lord shall raise me up, I trust."*

Alfred Lord Tennyson, used the metaphor of putting to sea on a final voyage as symbolic of dying but he added:

*"I hope to see my Pilot face to face  
When I have crost the bar."*

Lest I be accused of being an anglophile may I remind you of Benjamin Franklin's famous epitaph:

The Body of  
Benjamin Franklin  
Printer  
(Like the cover of an old book  
Its contents torn out  
And stript of its lettering and gilding)  
Lies here, food for worms.  
But the work shall not be lost  
For it will (as he believed) appear once more  
In a new and more elegant edition  
Revised and corrected  
by  
The Author.

Paul Dunbar expressed his hope this way,

*When all is done, say not my day is o'er,  
And that thro' night I seek a dimmer shore;  
Say rather that my morn has just begun, -  
I greet the dawn and not the setting sun,  
When all is done.*

But, impressive as their lines may be we do not need the testimony of poets or statesmen or even the saints. Let's take Jesus at his word. We know that in his Father's House there are many mansions and we have his assurance that he has gone on ahead to prepare a place for us. (See John 14:1-6)

*"I am the resurrection and the life, whoever believes in me, even if he dies, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die." He asked Martha, "Do you believe this?"*

He asks us the same question every day.

When George Weigel had to come up with a title for his authorized biography of Pope John Paul II he eventually settled on WITNESS TO HOPE. It is, therefore, entirely appropriate to end this talk with a word of advice from our Holy Father.

*"We must learn not to be afraid,  
we must rediscover a spirit of  
hope and a spirit of trust. Hope is  
not empty optimism springing  
from a naive confidence that the  
future will necessarily be better  
than the past. Hope and trust are  
the premise of responsible activity  
and nurtured in conscience."*

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