



Cemetery of St. Basil the Great: Together in Life... Together in Sleep

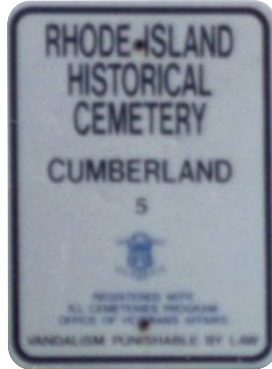
by Archimandrite John Azar

This article has been long in coming. I had wanted to write something about this topic for quite some time, both because of its uniqueness and importance to many. I decided that it was time. It was never intended to be a morbid account but rather one of dealing with the reality of the passing from this life in a special way...memories. In previous visits back home, I had taken some photos that I planned to keep for this very reason. They are very relevant for those who probably might not ever get the opportunity to visit the cemetery which holds the remains of two of their Bishops.

My home parish of St. Basil the Great in Lincoln, Rhode Island (formerly in Central Falls) boasts of being the only Melkite Parish in this country that has its own cemetery.

Our ancestral churches throughout the Near East, for centuries, have also had this custom and perhaps our churches in other parts of the world have the same tradition. Many of our Orthodox and Roman Catholic counterparts are fortunate to have maintained this custom.

In the early days of the then Syrian community of RI, the pioneer parishioners came from Aleppo, Damascus



and Maarrat, Saidnaya. Besides constructing the first of what was to be three parish buildings later, the second pastor and community wisely acquired a piece of property on Curran Rd. in Cumberland, approximately a half-hour from the site of the first church.

From early on, the parish was closely-knit and accustomed to enjoy

utilizing the property for picnics. My parents and older siblings told us stories of traveling to that property with the rest of the parishioners and spending the day by the brook in which they would put their watermelons to keep them cold. There, Fr. Timothy Jock, the second Pastor, and his flock would enjoy each other's company and listen to the late Habib Macksoud, singing popular songs and playing the oud (lute).

The foresight of the priest and supporters would prove to be well worth the acquisition one day. They had agreed to use the property for socializing until the first person in the parish fell asleep in the Lord. Following that, it would then be used as a cemetery for our parishioners...memories for many.

Every Memorial Day, as a young boy, I remember riding with the family to the

cemetery, joining with all the other parish families, to remember our deceased loved ones. Our Pastor, then Archimandrite (later Bishop) Justin Najmy, would conduct the Trisaghion Service and then proceed from grave to grave of the families who asked to have a special prayer at their family grave. The custom of the annual memorial service there thankfully remains to this day.

I remember our family, like others, rushing around the day before and early that day, trying to buy extra plants to place at the graves but making sure that we left the house in enough time to get to our cemetery for the service. This was due to the fact that an annual Memorial Day Parade would take place in Valley Falls, close to the Cumberland border. Invariably, there would always be those who didn't beat the parade and would arrive late at the cemetery...memories.

Having been away for so many years, being in so many places now, I don't get that special and particular opportunity and experience each year with my family and the RI community. Being home on various trips, before returning back, I made a visit to our cemetery, as others periodically have done for years. After I prayed at their earthly resting places, I made the circular drive on the property to once again leave with...memories.

What caught my eye again, as hap-



pens at every visit, were the tombs of the Clergy interred in our cemetery. This was the catalyst for my finally writing this article. There was so much connection and relation on these holy grounds.

As young children, we were always eager to walk to the former raised tomb of Fr. Timothy Jock, overlooking his people, awaiting the Lord's coming. He was also the founder of St. Basil Elementary School, the only Melkite school in the U.S., offering normal academic subjects. As for others, he had given me the grace of Baptism. Although noted to be stern, some families would remember honestly what they owe him. Back then, his former tomb was more in the unique and older style of those in the Near East than his modern one of today. We would curiously crowd around it, and cautiously take turns, peering into the open but darkened slits of the cement walls to see if we could see anything and then, all of a sudden, run in different directions because someone said they saw something move inside...memories!

Now, there are raised mausoleums for him, Bishop Justin Najmy, the first Melkite Bishop for America, who was also our third pastor in RI, who comically but thankfully came to my rescue in the seminary; for Archbishop Joseph Tawil, our first Eparch for America, who had ordained Bishop Nicholas Samra as his first priest and myself as his last in America, and for Archimandrite Peter (Bernard) Capucci, our fourth pastor...memories.

This recalls to mind an ancient Byzantine custom of interring Bishops, sometimes seated in their thrones, as if they were symbolically watching over their flock in death as they had in life. Although not followed here, it is an interesting custom to illustrate.

All of our pastors of RI, except Fr. Ananias Boury, who retired to the West Coast and is buried in a cemetery in California, are buried in our cemetery. The present pastor, Exarch Joseph Haggar, has plans to be interred there in the future as do I also.

Continuing to drive, I would soon pass the various graves of my relatives, who would always gather at my parents' home time and time again. These were families that had been so close in being raised together. The elders would recall the welcoming and supportive hand of my father, a recognized patri-



arch of another kind...memories.

As I made the drive further, I noticed the tombstone of Archimandrite Maxim Chalhoub, who, by the way, was one of our priests who accepted me as a seminarian for "field training" at St. Ann, then in Paterson, NJ. We, at St. Basil Seminary in Methuen, MA, and traveling to St. John Seminary in Brighton for the week, were the first to initiate these summer parish assignments. I would later follow him as one in a line of pastors at St. Anne, No. Hollywood, CA; in both places...memories.

I then came upon the tombstone of Afifeh Tawil Kiriaki, the late sister of Archbishop Joseph. She was one of my

parishioners, having been specifically entrusted to me in his own formidable manner, when I was Rector of our Annunciation Cathedral in Roslindale, MA. Her apartment coincidentally faced another cemetery in West Roxbury and she would lead me to the window each time when I visited her. Pointing to it, she would remind me of the Lord calling each of us home in time. I remember too Archbishop Joseph calling me to his room to give me insight to deliver her eulogy...memories.

The chapel of Sts. Joseph of Arimathea and Nicodemus overlooking the dotted tombstones, one after another, recalling to mind, the names and faces of persons who had been part of the earthly family of St. Basil Parish. Young, middle-aged, elderly...all were and still are part of that special community. So many with whom I, and others too, had special relationships. So many stories; so many family remembrances. So many lives were intertwined; so many blessings...memories.

I look back, thank and bless God for those memories, for the relationships, the experiences, the camaraderie, for the knowing many of these family members and their love. I bless God for the ranks of our special Clergy who guided us in our ongoing faith journey to the Kingdom.

Although humanly sad at times, the site really is never morbid. It is a place of faith where I hope and want to be laid to rest one day with my family. It is a place that will hold us temporarily for that other special place of "no pain, no grief and no sighing".

The Cemetery of St. Basil the Great is a special place for those who have known it. It is a unique place of which we are justifiably proud. It is our community resting place where we will lie together by that same cool brook, awaiting the Lord to call us from the Great Sleep... from our tombs to life. Indeed, it holds very special and blessed memories of and for our parish community and also for the larger Melkite community in the United States. It embraces the earthly remains of your spiritual shepherds of your holy Melkite Church...memories for all of you!

Memory Eternal!



Archimandrite John Azar is the pastor of St. John Chrysostom Melkite Church in Atlanta, GA.