

## **The True Meaning of Memorial Day**

While for many we consider this weekend to be the unofficial start of summer, we also must never forget the true meaning of Memorial Day.

Three years after the civil war ended, the head of an organization of Union Veterans established Decoration Day as a time for the nation to decorate the graves of the war dead with flowers. Originally it was decided that this would take place May 30th, as this was a day flowers would be blooming all across the country. In 1868, the first observance was held at Arlington National Cemetery.

The ceremonies centered around the mansion that was once Robert E. Lee's home, and various officials from Washington, including General Grant, presided over the ceremony. Children from the Soldiers' and Sailors' Orphan Home made their way through the cemetery and placed flowers on both the graves of both Union and Confederate Graves.

In the years that followed, local celebrations of this day would continue. And, while many now just celebrate with a cookout or a day off, countless others give back to honor this day as it was founded. For instance, this year in Agawam, Massachusetts, there is a state veteran's cemetery that is home to the remains of 8,000 men and women who fought bravely for our country. The annual Memorial Day ceremony begins on Monday, and every last one of the graves in the cemetery needs a flag. But this year, event organizers have some young volunteers to help them out. Numerous high school students have shown up to place those flags on all of the graves. One student remarked, "it's a great honor because these people basically sacrificed their lives to keep us free." The principal of Agawam High School, Steve Lemanski, remarked "They see sometimes familiar names. Their grandparents may be buried here or people that they know and I think it does give them a connection, which as we grow further apart - or further away from that year - it's important for them to remember." And another student said when he came out to place the flags, that he gets to "see what these wars do and see all these people who have given their lives to the military and our freedom and see that we should be able to give back to them."

Most recently in December of 2000, the "National Moment of Remembrance Act" was passed, creating the White House Commission on the National Moment of Remembrance. This commission is charged with "encouraging the people of the United States to give something back to their country, which provides them so much freedom and opportunity" by encouraging and coordinating commemorations in the United States of Memorial Day and the National Moment of Remembrance. That moment encourages all Americans to pause at 3 p.m. on Memorial Day for a moment of silence to honor those who have died in service to our Nation.

Of course, many of us will mark this weekend as a day for a day trip up north or just enjoying a day off. And there is nothing wrong with that at all. We work very hard, and it's nice to have a 3-day weekend and look forward to summer, or to grill some burgers

and take it easy on a Monday afternoon. So please, don't feel guilty for enjoying today with friends and family. But at the same time, my hope is that we also never take for granted the reason we have so many freedoms in our country is because so many people were willing to serve to safeguard them. As the Trinity, which we celebrate in our Church today, reveals perfected love, our soldiers who have made the ultimate sacrifice also reveal love in all they have done for us. With that in mind, I'd encourage us to keep in mind all they have done by praying for our veterans and those who have died, and praying for all of our active duty servicemen and women as we do each day at Mass, or by simply saying "thank you" to a veteran or a person in uniform. Above all else, never take for granted the remarkable country we live in by praying for our nation and realizing how blessed we are to be Americans.

On this Memorial Day, I'd like to close by sharing the prayer of Saint Sebastian, the patron Saint of Soldiers. A Roman Soldier who was a Christian, he was martyred for the faith. May God bless our troops, and God bless America.

Blessings!  
Fr. Paul

#### Prayer to St. Sebastian

Dear Commander at the Roman Emperor's court, you chose to be also a soldier of Christ and dared to spread faith in the King of Kings, for which you were condemned to die. Your body, however, proved athletically strong and the executing arrows extremely weak. So another means to kill you was chose and you gave your life to the Lord. May Soldiers be always as strong in their faith as their Patron Saint so clearly has been.  
Amen.