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Democracy Dies in Darkness

In Glover Park, an old Catholic cemetery gets new life

By **John Kelly**

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“I was never particularly interested in cemeteries,” **Grace Bateman** said as we stood amid the gravestones of Holy Rood, a burial ground that sits on the cusp of Georgetown and Glover Park.

I, on the other hand, have always been particularly interested in cemeteries, but this was one I’d never visited before. Frankly it never looked that inviting. For years I’d driven this stretch of Northwest Washington and seen a twisted chain-link gate and what looked like the ground tumbling onto Wisconsin Avenue.

“A lot of the tombstones were toppled and broken,” said Grace, describing the former state of the cemetery. The landscaping was once patchy, bare in some places, overgrown in others.

Not anymore. Holy Rood Cemetery — the final resting place for 7,000 people — has been reborn.

That’s thanks to a unique agreement between several parties and the injection of something that even the dead seem to need: money.

Holy Rood was founded in 1832 as the burial ground for parishioners of Holy Trinity, a Catholic church 11 blocks to the south. In an odd arrangement, ownership of the 6½ -acre cemetery eventually passed to Georgetown University.

It’s hard enough running a university without also having to run a cemetery, especially one sorely lacking in funds. The last plot for Holy Rood — “rood” means “cross” in Scottish — was sold in 1915. The last interment was in the 1980s. With no fresh cash coming in, the graveyard had become a dilapidated embarrassment.

When a cemetery runs out of space for more bodies, you can do one of two things: Make the cemetery bigger or make the bodies smaller. It’s only been in recent years that the Vatican has relaxed its opposition to cremation. Grace, a lawyer, and fellow Holy Trinity parishioner **Jack Brady**, an architect, proposed building a columbarium at Holy Rood.

After some initial resistance, the university agreed, granting an easement for its construction.

“To be honest, the breakthrough was a couple of years ago, when the Georgetown slavery report came out,” **the Rev. C. Kevin Gillespie**, Holy Trinity’s pastor, told me when I phoned him.

That was the exploration of the university’s ownership of enslaved people and the sale of nearly 300 African Americans in 1838. Buried at Holy Rood are the remains of both free and enslaved Black people, among them

some family members of **Anne Marie Becraft**, an educator and one of America's first African American nuns.

The renovation of Holy Rood was completed in the fall of 2019. A new black wrought iron fence faces Wisconsin Avenue. There's a new gate, too. Signage recounts the cemetery's history. Gravestones have been set upright, trees planted, benches installed.

A semicircular columbarium was built in a natural amphitheater. It faces what had been a holding crypt, where caskets were stored temporarily during the winter when the frozen ground was too hard to turn over.

The restored stone crypt and the new columbarium have 645 niches. You needn't be a member of the parish — or even Catholic — to buy one. Prices start at \$9,000.

Said Gillespie: "We kid people: 'Look, you want Georgetown property for life? Here's your deal.'"

There has been an unexpected side benefit to the cemetery's rebirth. When the coronavirus pandemic forced the closure of indoor religious services, it became the setting for socially distanced outdoor Mass. Holy Trinity even had a First Communion ceremony there, with masked children dressed up in their Sunday finest amid the tombstones.

Among the people buried at Holy Rood are **Joseph Nevitt**, a veteran of the Revolutionary War. **Thomas Henry French** is there, too. He was a U.S. cavalry officer who, as part of **Maj. Marcus A. Reno's** forces, engaged the Sioux four miles east of Little Big Horn, where **Gen. George Armstrong Custer** fought. French survived, Custer did not.

I asked Gillespie what it means that Holy Rood Cemetery has been resurrected.

"For parishioners, when their time comes, they'll know they're still a part of the faith community of Holy Trinity," he said. "It gives some consolation. And for people who are not parishioners — who aren't even Catholic — they'll know they're being prayed for. That gives them a sense of connectedness, both in this life and the next."

As dogs and their owners rambled through the graveyard, Grace and I walked up the slope behind the crypt and looked to the east. It was raw and blustery but in the distance we could see the dome of the U.S. Capitol and the Washington Monument. When all the leaves are off the trees, Grace said, you can glimpse a sliver of the Potomac.

"I love this view," she said. "I think a cemetery should be a place for the living."

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Grace Bateman sits on a bench overlooking the curving wall of a new columbarium at Holy Rood Cemetery in Glover Park. A parishioner at Holy Trinity, Grace helped revive the dilapidated graveyard. (John Kelly/The Washington Post)



A crypt at Holy Rood once held caskets. For years it was crumbling and covered in ivy. With the support of Holy Trinity Catholic Church and Georgetown University — and money from a new columbarium — the cemetery has been reborn. (John Kelly/The Washington Post)



The grave of a child at Holy Rood Cemetery on Wisconsin Avenue NW. More than 7,000 people are buried in the graveyard. (John Kelly/The Washington Post)