

Students keep soldiers' memory alive at U.S. cemetery Pope visits today

Claire Giangravè Nov 2, 2017
FAITH AND CULTURE CORRESPONDENT



The World War II Sicily-Rome American Cemetery and Memorial site in Nettuno, Italy. (Credit: altotemi/Flickr-Creative Commons.)

ROME - On November 2, Pope Francis will visit a military cemetery serving as the final resting place for over seven thousand American soldiers who died during the Italian campaign of World War II.

Spread over 77 acres, the Sicily-Rome American Cemetery and Memorial in Nettuno, not very far from Rome, offers an appropriate setting for the celebration: Seemingly infinite rows of white crosses and stars of David arching over the green hills of the Italian countryside.

November 2 is All Souls' Day, and in Italy and Latin America, it's customary for families to visit the tombs of their loved ones and share not only prayers, but sometimes even food, laying it on the grave.

Some of the gravestones in Nettuno are never visited, and no one places flowers or rocks over them. It is the same for the nearly 30,000 men and women who died in Italy to free it from fascism, and were buried far from home.

The 'Be the Difference - Never Again' highlights those who risked their lives to save others during WWII.

Its mission - according to [the website](#) - is to inspire people to take action in their lives and focus on events in history that demonstrate the power an individual has to make a difference in someone's life.

The Good Samaritans

On December 2, 2016, a man followed Elizabeth Bettina Nicolosi into the vestibule of her apartment in New York and attacked her for her wallet. She barely had the opportunity to raise her arms to protect herself when the robber dealt a powerful blow to her head.

He “came in to rob me and said ‘I’m ‘gonna kill you, I’m ‘gonna kill you, I’m ‘gonna kill you,’” Bettina told *Crux* in an interview. “And even though he got the pocket book right away, he kept chocking me and was going to kill me.”

A young couple heard the loud noises coming from outside the apartment and quickly ran toward them and called the police. The robber bolted when he heard them arrive, leaving Bettina severely battered and covered in blood.

“They came to save a stranger, a human being in need,” Bettina said. “That was ‘Be the Difference.’ I explained that they were not bystanders, they were Good Samaritans and they would be the difference.”

Bettina, the daughter of a Korean War veteran, and Robbie Shackelford, the director of the Harding University Semester Abroad Program in Florence, Italy, came up with the idea of finding a way to remember those who gave their lives in service to others during World War II.

Bettina is a Catholic who was raised in a majority Jewish community, which inspired her to write her book *It Happened in Italy: Untold Stories of How the People of Italy Defied the Horrors of the Holocaust*, about the men and women who defied the filo-Nazi regime by protecting their Jewish neighbors.

She was moved to create this program by the words of a holocaust survivor who said that if he could add one commandment to the ten already existing ones, it would be “Thou Shall Not be a Bystander.”

The initiative invites students all over the world to pick one name out of the thousands who died and discover their individual lives and experiences.

“To say ten thousand are buried, or six thousand are buried. It’s just a number, it’s not a name,” Bettina said. “When each student learns about someone they go ‘wow! This person had a life.’ And they realize something: That war is not just numbers, it’s one human being, one individual at a time making up thousands or millions.”

The author and survivor explained that one never knows when life might call you to save or help a stranger, and in such moments seconds matter. For her Good Samaritans, Johnny Lennon and Ashley Aversano, that call arrived and they were quick to answer.

“They risked their lives in order to save mine. How do you thank people who saved your life?” Bettina asked, and came up with the idea of organizing a private audience with Pope Francis at the Vatican to bless their wedding.

On April 25 they met with the pope, and Bettina handed him a note explaining what they had done for her and showing a picture of her mangled face in the hospital bed, alive only thanks to her rescuers.

"This pope was a bouncer, so I figured he knows what somebody beaten up looks like!" Bettina said. Still, she noticed that when Francis looked at the picture he gasped and took a step back.

On that day the pope had given his Ted Talk on the very theme of Good Samaritans, which he described as "the story of today's humanity."

"When one realizes that life, even in the middle of so many contradictions, is a gift, that love is the source and the meaning of life, how can they withhold their urge to do good to another fellow human being?" Francis had said.

"Let us help each other remember that the other is not a statistic or a number. The other has a face."

For Bettina, this has become her life's mission and she underlined the importance to take action once you know there is a need or cry for help.

"All those soldiers in Nettuno were not bystanders," she said, adding that though nothing can be done for the many young men and women who died 73 years ago except remember and honor them, much can be done now to help those who are alive.

"My hope is that when people see the pope at the cemetery, there's a thought that you can do something today for somebody else," she said. "Because these people gave their all, the least you can do is do something."

Breaching the cultural divide

Seventy-four years ago thousands of young Americans put on their helmets, crossed the Atlantic and risked their lives to save Italy and the world. Today there are over 35,000 young Americans who come to Italy each year - 10,000 in Rome alone - this time not to fight in a war, but to learn from its rich heritage and history in study abroad programs.

Anna Kemper, 21, is a student at Duquesne University, a Catholic school in Pittsburg run by the Congregation of the Holy Spirit, or Spiritans. She came to Rome last year for a semester abroad, where she participated in the 'Be the Difference' program.

"It definitely gave me respect for the military, for what American soldiers did in WWII, of what the Italians also did and how they do have a lot of gratitude," Kemper told *Crux*.

Twelve years ago, Michael Wright, Director of European Programs at Duquesne, launched a collaboration on several intercultural projects with Rome's Istituto Einstein - Bachelet high school. One of those projects is 'Be the Difference.'

Students from both schools pair up in groups of four - two from Duquesne and two from Bachelet - and research the life and history of a man or woman buried in Nettuno.

Kemper's fallen soldier was Chester Angel, who died at the age of 21 while on a mission he was not supposed to be on, but was assigned due to a

bureaucratic error. The students discovered that he was married and had a child before losing his life in Italy.

Kemper said the moment they found the telegram to his wife communicating that he had died, the reality of his death hit home for her.

The students are asked to plan a creative homage to the soldier when they visit the cemetery. Many bring flowers or poems to the seldom-visited tombstones, but Kemper brought a song with a verse she wrote for Angel.

"I did really feel God's presence there and I kinda felt Chester there," she said.

The research done by the students is gifted to the Nettuno cemetery and will soon be published. It includes pictures, documents and sometimes even testimonies from family members they tracked down in the United States.

"It is kind of a beautiful testament that the pope will be there to honor their sacrifices and just to say that especially in WWII, which was so ugly and evil, that these men ... they really were brave, and they did make a difference, and that things would be a whole lot different for all of us now if they wouldn't have sacrificed [their lives]," Kemper said.

She also highlighted the importance of getting to know the Italian students, saying that though "we are different and we're far apart, we are people and there's something so valuable about us just for that fact."

Maria Teresa Fiammetta Rivabella, the Exchange Coordinator at the Bachelet high school, emphasized the profound impact that the experience has had on her students.

"They touch with their hands the history that they only study in theory," she said, and "they realize that the soldiers who died at war are kids their own age."

With just a name, a death certificate, and few more hints, the kids are able to uncover the life of someone who died at around their age all those years ago. "Many are heroes, who died to help a fellow soldier or friend," Rivabella said. "Kids nowadays are very selfish, so these acts of gratuitous generosity really hit the mark."

In an interview with *Crux*, she expressed the hope that on Nov. 2 the pope remembers not only the many Americans who valiantly made the ultimate sacrifice for an ideal, a friend, or their country; but also the many Italians who are laid to rest not far from Nettuno.

On All Souls' Day, when Catholics pray for those who are in purgatory in the hope of heaven, who needs a prayer more than those who fought on the wrong side and were just as young and full of desire as their opponents?

"After all," Rivabella said. "In death we're all the same."