

Monuments to the unborn

On Jan. 22, 1987, the 14th anniversary of the U.S. Supreme Court's *Roe v. Wade* decision, the Franciscan University of Steubenville, Ohio, dedicated its Tomb of the Unborn Child. The remains of two aborted babies, Francis and Clare, were interred across from the University's Portiuncula Chapel, and the remains of five more were added in subsequent years.

"The Tomb is a place of great reverence on our campus, and has brought a greater awareness to the importance of the right to life," said Father Shawn Roberson, TOR, university chaplain. "It reminds us that abortion is a critical issue that affects our lives."

Father Roberson led a 30th anniversary rededication ceremony of the Tomb in 2017, when he told 150 gathered that "this tomb is a memorial of the truth. We recognize that we are still involved in this pro-life movement. ... This powerful emblem stands for where the heart of the university is on this very day. ... And we honor those who know that the fight is still going on and say that the Lord will triumph in the gift of love."

The Tomb includes a perpetual flame encircled by a stone patio and wooden benches, with two granite kneelers at its base and a stone crèche a few yards away. On Wednesdays, the university's Students for Life pray a Rosary at the site.

Monumental challenge

Cardinal John J. O'Connor of New York (1920-2000) was moved when he visited the Tomb in 1992. He challenged the Knights of Columbus to put a "tomb of the unborn child" at every Catholic cemetery – although more typically a memorial rather than a tomb with human remains – so that visitors to the sites will reflect that "the unborn put to death by abortion was as much

a human being as all the others buried there.”

The Knights generously responded, and currently over 1,835 such monuments have been established worldwide, not only at Catholic cemeteries but also parishes and other diocesan properties. Some dioceses have multiple sites; the Archdiocese of St. Louis has 15 parish and cemetery sites with monuments, ranging from simple headstones to elaborate memorials.

Others responding to the cardinal’s request include the Knights of Columbus of Oshkosh, Wisconsin, who established memorials at the city’s two Catholic cemeteries. Dick Forseth, grand knight of the local Knights council, said, “They’re at prominent sites at opposite ends of the city. You see them both coming and going.” In June, one of the sites will be enhanced to make it a statewide memorial.

Influential examples

The purpose of the monuments, Forseth explained, is to raise awareness of the abortion issue, as “we Knights have always stood up for the unborn.” They’re also a place of prayer, as the Knights visit the site during the warmer months to pray the rosary for the end of abortion.

The Knights of Columbus at St. Michael the Archangel Parish in Woodstock, Georgia, established a pro-life memorial in 2004 at the request of its pastor, Father Larry Niese. It features a statue of Our Lady of Grace; at the statue’s base is a tombstone with a heart and an image of an unborn child. The fetus is at 12 weeks, a time when abortion is most common.

Two benches facing the memorial bear quotes: “All things work together for the glory of God for those who love the Lord” (Rom 8:28) and “Never let anything so distress you that you forget the joy of the Resurrection” by Mother Teresa.

Father Niese has long been active in the pro-life cause. He prayed the Rosary in front of abortion clinics as a

seminarian, has assisted crisis pregnancy centers and offered counseling to those affected by abortion. He said, "If you don't have life, you don't have anything. We have over a million abortions per year in this country, which is horrendous. We need to do all we can to stop it."

He believes memorials are important as a woman who loses a child by natural causes can bury the child at a gravesite at which she can publicly grieve. He continued, "When you have an abortion, you don't have a place to go to publicly grieve. The memorial gives people a place to go and mourn."

He's used the memorial as part of an evening of prayer at the parish for those involved in abortion; part of the evening included going to the memorial and lighting candles for those who have been lost. Father Niese stresses to the parish that the memorial is for anyone in need of healing, whether related to abortion or not, as to relieve the possible stigma of those who want to visit the site. He explained, "We make our people aware that it is a place to promote healing and hope."

Monuments to the unborn can play an important role in defending the right to life, believes Father Roberson. He concluded, "They can affect our spirituality, making something that initially seems distant up close and personal."

Jim Graves writes from California.

*Feature photo is of Calvary Cemetery memorial in Oshkosh, Wis.
Courtesy photo*