



# “Green” Burial in the Catholic Tradition

— by Maria Margiotta

*Varied species of wildflowers fill the two acres of the Natural / Green Burial Site at Maryrest Cemetery and Mausoleum in Mahwah, New Jersey.*

Before the development of chemical embalming, metal-lined caskets, or cement burial vaults, there was simply a shroud and a hole in ground... a burial tradition that humankind embraced for thousands of years. Such was the way Catholics honored their loved ones throughout much of the Church’s history, respecting the Biblical tenets of “*ashes to ashes, dust to dust.*”

Today, a natural or “green” burial process of returning one’s remains to the earth as directly and as simply as possible is chosen by an increasing number of Americans. For some, it may be a spiritually-fulfilling alternative to traditional interment or cremation. Perhaps it places greater emphasis on our corporeal existence – our life as part of God’s creation, and not apart from it as we give ourselves back completely to God’s earth and quickly return to dust. After all, Jesus was laid to rest in a shroud in a tomb of rock.

It seems that natural burial is an ideal way to honor our Catholic faith in the Resurrection and the cycle of death and rebirth. In choosing this option, we are committing our bodies to the earth in the purest way, free of preservatives, metal or concrete. Not only is it a return to burial traditions of the past, but it also may be a statement of personal values for those who wish to minimize their impact or “carbon footprint” on the environment.

Similar to the concept of eco-friendly attitudes toward most consumer products and services, natural burial preferences are a reflection of today’s eco-consciousness among Americans.

Green burials are expected to grow in popularity in the U.S. According to a 2015 survey by the Funeral and Memorial Information Council, 64 percent of respondents indicated an interest in green funerals, up from 43 percent in 2010.

Additionally, demand for green burials among surveyed cemeteries providing the service has increased by 72 percent, according to a 2015 survey by the Green Burial Council, and “Baby Boomers” (born 1946-1964) are the generation most interested in natural burial.

Following requests from Catholics seeking a green burial option, Catholic Cemeteries of the Archdiocese of Newark dedicated a two-acre site at Maryrest Cemetery and Mausoleum in Mahwah, New Jersey, as a “Natural/Green” resting place in 2010. The wildflower-filled meadow was part of an extensive cemetery expansion that included new mausoleums and a chapel. It was one of the first Catholic cemeteries in the state to set aside land for eco-friendly interments.

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*The Natural/Green Burial Site at Maryrest Cemetery and Mausoleum features memorialized birdhouses built by visiting high school students and a life-sized statue of Saint Francis of Assisi taming a wild wolf perched atop an enormous boulder overlooking the wildflower-filled meadow.*

To date, 35 Catholics are interred in this space, which is free from burial containers, vaults, headstones, and decorations.

“The natural burial section at Maryrest offers families a beautiful space to remember a loved one in an undisturbed setting,” said Andrew P. Schafer, K.H.S., CCCE, Executive Director of Catholic Cemeteries. “When family members visit, they find a place filled with life and beauty. Wildlife such as deer, rabbits, and birds live in the meadow, and vibrant

wildflowers and plant life create a peaceful and serene setting for prayer and reflection.”

To help foster a natural habitat for wildlife, the Archdiocese staff planted approximately 5,000 trees, 2,500 shrubs, and numerous native grasses and plants, such as arrowwood viburnum, pagoda dogwood and spicebush. Additionally, Catholic Cemeteries, in partnership with the Archdiocese of Newark’s Catholic Youth Organization, created a birdhouse building program to help



educate high school students about the many aspects of a Catholic cemetery while also providing appropriate shelter for the many species of birds living in the area. Later, students and their families return to see their birdhouses occupied by local wildlife and enjoy the cemetery’s natural beauty.

The natural burial section also features boulder memorialization to keep the area free of manufactured materials, such as headstones and meandering visitation pathways made of crushed stone, to help keep the plant and animal life thriving and undisturbed. Nearby, a beautiful Amish wooden gazebo (*below*) is available for committal services, and a life-sized statue of Saint Francis of Assisi (*at left*), the patron saint of ecology, taming a wild wolf is perched atop an enormous boulder, safeguarding the animals, plants and natural surroundings.

For individuals who request a natural burial, the Archdiocese offers three levels of green interment options:

**Light Green** for those who prefer a biodegradable casket, some type of memorialization and natural embalming fluids;

**Medium Green** for those who prefer a biodegradable casket with memorialization on one of the nearby boulders; and,

**Dark Green** for those who prefer a simple shroud.

“It is a choice that families are examining,” said Schafer. “Unlike a traditional burial or cremation, this option has the least impact on the environment and is simply a natural way of returning to the earth.

For Catholics especially, it can be an expression of profound reverence for the body and the sacredness of life, a deep respect for the integrity of creation and God’s good earth, and of course, it emulates the most famous burial of all.” ♥