



To Lie Down in Green Pastures:

How the Catholic Church is leading the way in green burial

Green Burial Rising

In more than a dozen states in the US, Catholic cemeteries are now offering green burial, uniting bodies with the earth in sacred ground where nature takes its course.

While some sectors of the country are holding fast to conventional burial practices that involve toxic chemical embalming, ornate caskets, and non-biodegradable vaults, or are adopting cremation at rapid rates, the Catholic Church appears to be embracing with conviction the ancient practice of full body earth burial.



How does green burial intersect with Catholic ideology? Why is the Church paving the way for the faithful to shift from conventional American disposition practices to one that is widely considered by mainstream funeral industry proponents as an environmental fad? After okaying cremation more than fifty years ago, how is the Church reconciling the two?

Regardless of early industry resistance, green burial is rising, both in practice and in the national consciousness, as witnessed by the burgeoning home funeral and green burial movements. The first green burial cemetery in the US opened in 1998, and today there are well over 130 known green burial grounds. More than half of those, called hybrid cemeteries, set aside areas for burial that eschew impediments to decomposition, and Catholic cemeteries are providing just such space in increasing numbers.

Father Charles Morris, former administrator of the first Catholic cemetery certified by the Green Burial Council, Mount Carmel in Wyandotte, MI, summed it up this way in an article published in 2012: "Nature, the gift God has given us, is intended to shelter us during our lifetime, and again after we no longer inhabit our bodies. As with all living organisms when no longer viable, our bodies may be recycled into new life. Nature doesn't create waste, and when we bury our bodies without

"When we speak of the "environment", what we really mean is a relationship existing between nature and the society which lives in it. Nature cannot be regarded as something separate from ourselves or as a mere setting in which we live. We are part of nature, included in it and thus in constant interaction with it."

*– On Care for Our Common Home
Encyclical, Pope Francis, 139*

anything that slows down the natural processes, our bodies become one with the earth and with nature—and thus with God. And if this is God’s plan for us to dwell in the soil that produces life on Earth, why would we pollute the gift He has given us by putting chemicals and concrete and other things there? ...There is no more appropriate way to honor our Catholic Christian tradition of Resurrection faith than by fitting into a natural cycle of death and rebirth where we honor both our loved ones and God’s good earth.”¹

Burial and Resurrection

“In death, the separation of the soul from the body, the human body decays and the soul goes to meet God, while awaiting its reunion with its glorified body. God, in His almighty power, will definitively grant incorruptible life to our bodies by reuniting them with our souls, through the power of Jesus’ Resurrection.”

—Catechism of the Catholic Church, 997

Father Morris, in an article published in 2012 stated, “While some may regard this form of burial as odd, remember that Jesus was laid to rest in a shroud, without embalming or a burial vault. This has been the way Christians have honored their loved ones throughout most of the Church’s 2,000 years.”²

The Catholic preference for burial is a foundational belief in eternal life for body and soul. The Church teaches reverence for the body in which the soul resides; the body is considered the temple of the Holy Spirit. It is believed that with the Second Coming of Christ, the bodies of the faithful will be reunited with the souls who have been commanded into God’s keeping.

Bishop Robert Morlino of the Diocese of Madison, WI, explains it this way: “We care for the body as heaven-bound. The body, which is corruptible, is going to put on incorruptibility...and immortality, and will be glorified. We’re not disposing of the body in the grave...we’re allowing it to rest in order to have it raised up...”³ Green burial provides a way for bodies to rest in nature without disturbance, and with reverence.

Canon law requires that burial ground be blessed, rendering it sacred. If it is not feasible to bless the entire cemetery, individual graves and portions of cemeteries may be blessed. In general, green burial cemeteries are able to accommodate this request. Dedicated green space in Catholic cemeteries is hallowed ground set aside for those whose commitment to nature is also essential to their faith.

“So will it be with the resurrection of the dead. The body that is sown is perishable, it is raised imperishable; it is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory; it is sown in weakness, it is raised in power; it is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body. If there is a natural body, there is also a spiritual body.”

—Corinthians 15:42-44

Commitment to Nature

Green burial offers the faithful a connection to nature professed by early monastics and some of the church's great spiritual teachers, including Saint Francis of Assisi. In the words of Pope Francis, who chose his papal name in honor of St. Francis, "Everything is connected. Concern for the environment thus needs to be joined to a sincere love for our fellow human beings and an unwavering commitment to resolving the problems of society."⁴

Green burial also offers the opportunity to help create sacred space in protected land conservation areas. This is where the relationship between the living and the dead meshes. Pope Francis quotes Pope John Paul II in his message to the 1990 World Day of Peace by writing, "If the simple fact of being human moves people to care for the environment of which they are a part, Christians in their turn realize that their responsibility within creation, and their duty towards nature and the Creator, are an essential part of their faith."⁵

Green burials invite families to participate in age-old customs that reflect the path of Jesus. Typically, preparing the body by bathing and anointing, shrouding or casketing in a simple biodegradable container, and participating in grave decoration and the burial process itself, are practices that are included in a green burial; these practices honor the dead while healing the living. Graveside services have the capacity for great solace and comfort in a green cemetery.

Cremation

In 1963, the Second Vatican Council issued "Piam et Constantem" permitting Catholics to be buried in non-Catholic cemeteries and to be cremated. Canon law forbids scattering or dividing cremains and requires that those who choose cremation bury the cremated remains in sacred ground. The Catholic Church has stated unequivocally that cremated remains must also be buried in hallowed ground, not scattered, not kept in private homes.⁶

Despite soaring cremation rates, cremation is not always a first choice among Americans of any religion. Most often, cost and convenience are the prevailing considerations for choosing cremation, though some believe erroneously that cremation is more environmentally friendly than conventional burial. To the contrary, cremation emits greenhouse gasses and toxic elements such as mercury into the atmosphere. The setting for cremation often deters families from being present during the final goodbye, further distancing them from what could be an emotionally and spiritually healing funeral experience. More than 50 years after the Church sanctioned cremation, only approximately one-third of all Catholics are choosing this option.⁷

Mark Harris, author of Grave Matters, suggests that, "...the vast majority who come to green burial are converts from cremation." He points out that when green burial practices were introduced in Sweden, fewer people chose cremation and the burial rate rose for the first time in 70 years.⁸

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—Pope Francis quoting John Paul II

Catholics who veered from strict doctrine toward cremation over the last few decades are finding the return to full body burial in green cemeteries to be more in keeping with past family and community traditions and spiritually enriching and in keeping with family and community traditions. Catholic cemeteries that offer green burial opportunities to their flock are throwing a life line to the faithful who want to leave a lasting legacy to the Earth when they die.

In regard to convenience, Father Morris asks, “What have we gained in practical convenience that we might have lost in spiritual depth as we face the greatest of all human mysteries: death? In bringing about a deeper reverence for the body of our loved ones, aren't we also honoring the sacredness of their life? Green burials, from my experience, are witness to the reality that we, indeed, are a part of creation, and not apart from it. And of course, the most famous burial of all was a shroud burial.”⁹

Consumerism

In his encyclical on nature, Pope Francis devotes a great deal of thought to the interrelationship between consumerism and human concern for the Earth. Although he does not speak to burial practices specifically, he strongly infers that the faithful have a moral obligation to practice care and responsibility in consuming goods that endanger the planet.

Purchase of standard funeral goods—metal and exotic wood caskets, concrete and plastic vaults, large headstones made of non-native stone, all with large carbon footprints and residual economic, cultural and health damage to the countries and their people where they are harvested—has largely been motivated by the sentiment that the more we spend, the more we demonstrate our love for the deceased. More people are rejecting this maxim and choosing to purchase items that reflect basic Christian precepts of simplicity, authenticity, and humility. Homemade caskets, hand-sewn shrouds, fair trade goods, or those made by local artists and craftspeople from regionally sourced materials are all in keeping with conscientious consumer habits.

“... economic powers continue to justify the current global system where priority tends to be given to speculation and the pursuit of financial gain, which fail to take the context into account, let alone the effects on human dignity and the natural environment.”

*– On Care for Our Common Home
Encyclical, Pope Francis, 56*

Pope Francis also speaks to the need to re-educate ourselves and the next generations about the risks that current practices present. He urges education in schools, at home, in the media, and through the Church. “In those countries which should be making the greatest changes in consumer habits, young people have a new ecological sensitivity and a generous spirit, and some of them are making admirable efforts to protect the environment. At the same time, they have grown up in a milieu of extreme consumerism and affluence which makes it difficult to develop other habits. We are faced with an educational challenge.”¹⁰

The Pope calls on businesses to do things differently by offering products and services that meet the needs of consumers, and for consumers to enter into the relationship of buying and selling differently. “When social pressure affects their earnings, businesses clearly have to find ways to produce differently. This shows us the great need for a sense of social responsibility on the part of consumers.”¹¹

Green burial generally is less expensive than conventional burial. It does not require expensive invasive, invasive body care practices such as embalming, elaborate or ornate non-biodegradable caskets, or concrete, plastic or fiberglass vaults. Burial plot costs are different by market region, but there is no evidence of a marked difference between conventional and green burial plots. Families may be frugal without embarrassment, or spend what they choose to achieve their own aesthetic.

Enriching the Catholic Community

The renewed commitment to the authentic spiritual tradition of full body burial coupled with conscious land stewardship and intentional consumerism points directly at green burial as a Catholic practice that will grow over time, especially if the Church continues to embrace the opportunity for growth as it has indicated thus far.

In a 2011 survey conducted by US Catholic Magazine, readers indicated that, if available, 80% would prefer a green burial.¹² This level of interest outpaces a 2015 Harris poll reporting a response from the general public at 64%, a rise from 43% in 2010.¹³ This speaks to a rise in interest within the Catholic consciousness in more traditional after death practices. This increased interest, combined with the opportunities being presented by cemeteries in Catholic dioceses around the country, portends a future for green burial that has the potential of enriching after death experiences for all. Green burial, embraced by the Catholic community, provides an environment of acceptance and adherence to Church doctrine that resonates with the faithful.

¹ *Lay your loved ones to rest the natural way* by Rich Heffern. National Catholic Reporter, April 21, 2009, ncronline.org

² Ibid.

³ *Changing Catholic Attitudes about Cremation* by Jim Graves. Catholic World Report, November 3, 2012 catholicworldreport.com.

⁴ *On Care for Our Common Home* Encyclical Letter, *Laudato Si'* of the Holy Father Francis, 91.

⁵ *Laudato Si'*, quoting John Paul II, *Message for the 1990 World Day of Peace*, 15: AAS 82 (1990), 156.

⁶ [Final Resting Place: Vatican Releases Instruction on Burial, Cremation](#) by Cindy Woodsen, 10.25.16, Catholic News Service

⁷ *Changing Catholic Attitudes about Cremation* by Jim Graves. Catholic World Report, November 3, 2012. catholicworldreport.com.

⁸ *US a Cremation Nation? Maybe Not.* by Mark Harris. grave-matters.blogspot.com. Thursday, February 5, 2015.

⁹ *Green burials offer ecological, ancient way to say goodbye to loved ones* by Father Charles Morris. National Catholic Reporter, June 21, 2012. ncronline.org.

¹⁰ *On Care for Our Common Home* Encyclical Letter, *Laudato Si'* of the Holy Father Francis, 209.

¹¹ *Ibid*, 206.

¹² USCatholic.org [survey results](#) in response to *Think outside the box: Being green at the end of life* by Joe Sehee, November 2011, Vol. 76, No. 11, pages 26-30.

¹³ *New Study Shows Americans Recognize the Role of Memorialization in Healthy Healing Following the Death of a Loved One.* Funeral and Memorial Information Council (FAMIC) commissioned Harris Poll conducted March 31 – April 10, 2015 www.famic.org.