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Nearly 60 new trees line Georgia Avenue outside Gate of Heaven Cemetery, in Silver Spring, Maryland. The new trees were planted with the help of Laudato Trees, a lay-led program that has planted more than 1,000 trees across the Washington D.C. Archdiocese. (Courtesy of Casey Trees)



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A week before many U.S. families cut down pines and spruces to place in their homes for Christmas, a group of Catholics organized a day of planting for 58 new trees at Gate of Heaven Cemetery in Silver Spring, Maryland, outside Washington D.C.

The crew of 70 volunteers planted 10 different tree species on Nov. 22, the Saturday before Thanksgiving. Red cedars, magnolias and willows, evergreen hollies, loblolly pines, and fittingly near the nation's capital, nine cherry trees.

They also placed in the ground a single Eastern Redbud sapling, which received special designation as the 1,000th tree planted in the Washington Archdiocese by the lay Catholic initiative known as Laudato Trees.

"Took a while, but we got there," said Philip Downey, one of the founders of Laudato Trees.



Three volunteers pose with a newly planted Eastern Redwood sapling at Gate of Heaven Cemetery, in Silver Spring, Maryland, the 1,000th tree planted in the Washington Archdiocese through the Laudato Trees program. (Courtesy of Philip Downey)

Since beginning in 2021 with a group of five Catholics inspired by Pope Francis' encyclical "*Laudato Si'*, on Care for Our Common Home," Laudato Trees has seen symbiotic potential, both practically and symbolically, between the numerous environmental and health benefits trees bring and the archdiocese's massive geographic footprint. It has an inventory of 139 parishes, 90 schools and dozens more ministries, religious congregations and other church organizations.

To guide their work, they set a round number target: 1,000 new trees.

"It's very gratifying to actually meet the goal," Downey said.

"It takes a lot of plantings to get to 1,000."

[Related: Laudato Trees planting program enlists Catholic properties to help increase DC's canopy](#)

To date, the vision of Laudato Trees has taken root through more than four dozen Catholic properties in the D.C. Archdiocese that spans the nation's capital and five counties in southern Maryland.



A group of 70 volunteers helped plant 58 trees along Georgia Avenue outside Gate of Heaven Cemetery, in Silver Spring, Maryland, as part of a tree planting event Nov. 22 organized by the lay Catholic initiative Laudato Trees. (Courtesy of Casey Trees)

While having the support of the Washington Archdiocese, Laudato Trees is an independent program. It sees trees, planted at no cost, as a simple way for Catholics in the District to live out the teachings that Francis instilled in *Laudato Si'* — his papal letter to the world calling all people to restore the relationship with the rest of the created world by addressing environmental harms humanity is causing like

climate change, biodiversity loss, pollution and deforestation.

"[Francis] was a very forceful voice, and he used his pulpit, I think, very powerfully as a world leader to try and focus attention on climate change and on the climate crisis," said Downey, a retired urban planner who returned to the church himself after reading the encyclical.

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Trees are central players in limiting climate change as they absorb and store carbon dioxide and other heat-trapping emissions released that are driving global warming, primarily from burning coal, oil and gas. Beyond that, trees provide habitats for animals, mitigate flooding, beautify and cool neighborhoods and [offer health benefits](#) like reduced stress, stronger immune systems, improved mental health and even crime reduction.

"Putting your tree in the ground is a real statement of: This is an act that'll improve the atmosphere, support animals and insects and make the world a better place," Downey said. "It's a very tangible, concrete and relatively easy thing to do. So that's why I like it so much."

For Laudato Trees, the journey to 1,000 trees was marked with mostly small-scale plantings of two or three trees at a time. There were some mid-scale projects of 10 to 20 trees and a few larger efforts like the one at Gate of Heaven Cemetery.

Most began with a simple phone call or email, asking if they might be interested in some free trees on their land. Laudato Trees works with local partners and grant funders to cover the costs, including the D.C. nonprofit Casey Trees that works to expand the region's tree canopy.

To plant trees at Gate of Heaven, Casey Trees secured a grant from the Arbor Day Foundation after the Trump administration [rescinded](#) millions in federal funds for urban trees planting originally designated under the [2022 Inflation Reduction Act](#).

A few of the trees were planted inside the 100-plus-acre cemetery itself, with most lining Georgia Avenue outside the gate to create a visual and sound barrier along the busy road.



A volunteer finishes planting a loblolly pine sapling during a Laudato Trees planting event Nov. 22 at Gate of Heaven Cemetery, in Silver Spring, Maryland. (Courtesy of Casey Trees)

"Who doesn't want trees and who doesn't want shade and tree canopy?" said Matthew Stewart, Gate of Heaven general manager. "So it was really an easy decision."

After 1,000 trees in the ground, Laudato Trees is not finished. It has discussed adding more trees at Gate of Heaven and plans to reach back to some parishes and

places about second plantings, as well as others initially hesitant, too.

They also hope to meet at some point with new Cardinal Robert McElroy, [one of the leading U.S. bishops on environmental matters](#).

"We're very encouraged by his positions on *Laudato Si'*," Downey said.

It was "a blessing," Downey added, for Laudato Tree's 1,000th planting to come in 2025 during the 10-year anniversary of *Laudato Si'*, and fittingly, in a setting where memories of people endure beyond their physical lives. He sees the efforts of Laudato Trees as one way that Francis' legacy of environmental concern will continue to grow in the Washington Archdiocese for decades to come.

"This particular program, it's really just a matter of persistence," he said.

"As the parable [[in Luke's Gospel](#)] says, keep on knocking. Don't take no for an answer. Soon or later, something good will happen."

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