# Green Saints for a Green Generation

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# INTRODUCTION

**LIBBY OSGOOD, CND**

At the center of ourselves there is a spirit of courage and of hope. At our very core, in the most intimate and primordial depth of each one of us, is our being. With each heartbeat and each breath our deepest self is connected in a symphonic song with each and every being around us. Each inhalation inextricably links us with the verdant exhalation of the trees and leaf-bearing creation. Our movements resonate through the air, absorbed by stones and structures. Our words amplify like beacons, able to inspire, inform, or harm. We are but a blink of the cosmos, standing in awe before the immensity of time and space. Whether gazing at the stars or looking down a mountain range, in the stillness of the forest or amid the crashing of the waves, we realize we are one part of a great and grand system of all that is, was, and will be. We inhabitants of the universe—the flora, fauna, and funga; the carnivores, herbivores, and omnivores; the minerals, mountains, and stars—are all interconnected. We creatures are enlivened and loved into being by the Divine Presence, a relational trinity of creator, incarnate, and spirit. Empowered to care for creation, we beings who are human have a responsibility to acknowledge our place within the cosmos and to protect and preserve our common home.

And yet, in a troubled world where greed and consumerism reign, we allow profits to be prioritized over people, over the Earth, and over the future well-being of all planetary inhabitants. For those who are listening to the cries of the Earth and the cries of the poor, our spirit, too, cries out demanding better, pleading for a more just world and a sustainable future. We speak up to protect planetary vegetation, waters, and habitats, not just for the future of humanity, but because all forms of life on the Earth are interconnected and dependent on one another. Chaotic weather patterns, rising sea levels, and deforestation abound. In the midst of so much uncertainty, it is easy to become disheartened. How, then, can we retain our spirit of hope and be catalysts for change, working toward a brighter future?

In the Roman Catholic tradition we turn to the saints for sources of strength and inspiration. They become our models to emulate, our standards to strive for. In these times of ecological crisis, who are the saints that can provide us with inspiration and hope? Saint Francis of Assisi is famously embraced as the patron of ecology, particularly for his "Canticle of Creation" and his relationship with animals. Saint Kateri Tekakwitha, an Indigenous woman who lived in what is now upstate New York and near Montreal, is a patron of traditional ecology. For her writings on nature and medicine, Saint Hildegard of Bingen is considered a patron of ecology as well as a doctor of the church. The Celtic saints, remembered for their intimacy and kinship with animals, include Saints Brigid, Patrick, Brendan, Columba, and many more holy people who lived in Ireland and Great Britain during the fifth to tenth centuries. In his 2015 encyclical *Laudato Si',* Pope Francis lauds the ecological witness of Saints John of the Cross, Thérèse of Lisieux, and Bonaventure, among others. The example of these saints can guide our actions, helping us to discern environmentally beneficial practices and to develop an ecospirituality attentive to our place in the greater planetary ecology.

Though it has been nearly eight years since the release of *Laudato Si'*, environmental awareness has not taken root everywhere as a Catholic social-justice issue. In the encyclical Pope Francis declares there is an interconnected relationship among God, all of creation, the human community, and our individual selves. He links social and environmental issues and challenges us to engage in a paradigm shift, changing societal structures and calling us to individual conversion. In his 2023 environmental encyclical, *Laudate Deum,* Pope Francis justifies the need for a second encyclical to acknowledge the unresponsiveness of people to act on behalf of the planet. He says, "I feel obliged to make these clarifications, which may appear obvious, because of certain dismissive and scarcely reasonable opinions that I encounter, even within the Catholic Church" (no. 14).

Despite his strong papal teaching connecting environmental responsibility and faith, I have yet to hear it proclaimed in a homily. I am patiently waiting for the day when we are invited—from the pulpit—to embrace our ecological responsibility and to be reminded that one of the seven themes of Catholic social teaching, according to the United States Catholic Conference of Bishops (USCCB), is "care for God's creation." The bishops state:

> On a planet conflicted over environmental issues, the Catholic tradition insists that we show our respect for the Creator by our stewardship of creation. Care for the earth is not just an Earth Day slogan, it is a requirement of our faith. We are called to protect people and the planet, living our faith in relationship with all of God's creation.[1]

[1] USCCB, "The Summary Report of the Task Force on Catholic Social Teaching and Catholic Education," in *Sharing Catholic Social Teaching: Challenges and Directions* (2011).

Caring for the inhabitants of Earth is a requirement of our faith. Yet, this message has not been proclaimed loudly enough to the people in the pews. While many Catholics have embraced their responsibility to care for the poor and respect the sanctity of life, that protection seems limited to *Homo sapiens*. How then, do we help the USCCB and Pope Francis carry the message of environmental care to all people?

The ecological lone voices in the wilderness, recalling Isaiah 40:3, are memorialized in Rachel Carson's and Lynn White's foundational works and embodied by Jane Goodall in her observations of chimpanzees. Inspired by the writings of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, a Jesuit priest and paleontologist who lived during the first half of the twentieth century, Father Thomas Berry's "Great Work" encourages humans to be less disruptive and more respectful of Earth. In recent decades Brian Swimme, Elizabeth Johnson, Richard Rohr, Thich Nhat Hanh, and numerous environmentalists, spiritual guides, and theologians have developed our understanding of ecologically centered spirituality.

Perhaps it is time for the next generation to put on the yoke of ecological responsibility and continue to spread the message. All of the chapters of this book are written by authors who could be considered part of the green generation. Together, we identify as Gen Z, Millennials, or persons on the cusp on Gen X. We grew up in a time when the Blue Marble image of Earth was a well-known selfie found in our textbooks, and we never knew a time before that image was taken. We were taught to recycle and conserve water from our first preschool classes and commercials on television. We have always been citizens of Earth, and the image of the globe as seen from space without borders is deeply embedded in our identities.

As a self-identifying Millennial, the earliest lessons I remember are about the danger of smoking and the need to protect pandas

from extinction. On a daily basis my worry about our collective planetary future is a constant hum invading my thoughts and guiding most of my decisions. The disposable plastic straws that once floated in my ice tea have been replaced with metal or paper straws. I carry a reusable metal water bottle/coffee mug to reduce single-use plastic bottles. The mass consumption of meat pervades my daily existence, and I overthink the impact of each plastic wrapper at the grocery store.

Millennials have never known a time when we were *not* worried about the planet or the long-term forecast for Earth and all creatures who exist within it. For Gen Z, the situation is more dire. They are growing up with the effects already apparent, moving beyond the worrying phase and crying out for action. Perhaps the most vocal Gen Z environmental activist is Greta Thunberg, who declares, "The richest 1 percent of the world's population are responsible for more than twice as much carbon pollution as the people who make up the poorest half of humanity."[2] And she is right. One of the seven themes of Catholic social teaching is the "option for the poor and vulnerable," and the most vulnerable people in our world are directly affected by the decisions of corporations in the over-developed nations, which are driven by a desire for profit. Environmental degradation, accelerated by greed and consumerism, has a direct impact on the poorest people in our world.

In *The Climate Book,* where Thunberg has assembled essays from the world's leading scientists, she writes, "Right now many of us are in need of hope. But what is hope? And hope for whom?"[3] My reply to her is that hope takes many forms. Hope is a powerful force, residing in the depths of who we are

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[2] Greta Thunberg, *The Climate Book* (New York: Penguin Random House, 2022), 3.

[3] Ibid.

at the core of our being. Hope is also a pulsing, emanating persistence. Sitting in the present, looking ahead to the unknown, hope is an avenue and an opportunity. It is a willingness to go on, instilling an optimism that tomorrow will be better and a desire to see it happen. Hope colors our perception and affects the outcome, shaping our future selves. Hope lifts our spirit like a balloon, gently swaying through the sky, rising through the clouds, bounding side to side between atmospheric particles, unaffected and oblivious, effortlessly continuing to climb. Last, hope is a buoy to cling to when floating in an ocean of chaos, crashing waves, and deep waters. It is the certainty that calm seas will come again, that the storm will settle. Hope is a promise for peace in the future.

When William Shatner, *Star Trek*'s Captain Kirk, went to space as a ninety-year-old man, he explained that he expected to feel awe and wonder, but instead

> the contrast between the vicious coldness of space and the warm nurturing of Earth below filled me with overwhelming sadness. Every day, we are confronted with the knowledge of further destruction of Earth at our hands: the extinction of animal species, of flora and fauna . . . things that took five billion years to evolve, and suddenly we will never see them again because of the interference of mankind. It filled me with dread. My trip to space was supposed to be a celebration; instead, it felt like a funeral.[4]

He described that for anyone viewing the Earth from space, "a sense of the planet's fragility takes hold in an ineffable, instinctive manner."[5]

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[4] William Shatner, *Boldly Go: Reflections on a Life of Awe and Wonder* (New York: Atria Books, 2022), 90.

[5] Ibid.

How do we hold on to our hope when we are at our lowest, as Shatner experienced? How do we tap into the eternal wellspring of hope when facing the overwhelming feelings of resistance, helplessness, and futility? How can we amplify that emanating, pulsing beacon within us whose source connects us to all of the goodness in our world?

These are the times when we most need the saints to be our beacons of hope and sources of inspiration. Louis Savary, a mathematician and theologian, explains: "We have saints who live lives of prayer, fasting, and suffering. We have martyr saints dying for their faith. But where are the saints who want to transform the world?"[6] In this book we offer essays on saints who provide hope in the face of ecological uncertainty. These are not the saints listed above, who have been traditionally associated with the environment. Instead, we offer reflections on beloved saints who are less commonly connected to ecology, such as Saint Ignatius of Loyola. Then we explore ecological witnesses who have not been canonized but offer their inspiration and guidance during these times of ecological crisis, such as Sister Laura Vicuña Pereira Manso who, as of July 2023 when this introduction was penned, is actively working with Indigenous groups in the Amazon to protect both the people and the land.

The desire to assemble a book on green saints originated while I was composing a journal article to determine whether Saint Marguerite Bourgeoys, the foundress of my religious community, engaged in ecological practices. Part of the mission statement of the Congregation of Notre-Dame is to "honour, respect and protect our common home, through concrete actions, motivated by an integral ecological awareness."[7] As an academic, the concrete action I could take was to research the environmentally inspired

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[6] Louis M. Savary, *Phenomenon of Man Explained* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2020), 176.

[7] Congregation of Notre-Dame, www1.cnd-m.org.

elements of our foundress's writings and example. Yet, while performing a literature review, I found very few articles on ecological practices of the saints. Thus, I examined the practices and writings of known ecological saints such as Saint Francis of Assisi, Saint Kateri Tekakwitha, Celtic saints, and the saints highlighted in *Laudato Si'* to develop six indicators of an ecological saint: (1) an intimate, interdependent relationship with the environment, (2) frequent immersion in the natural world, (3) awareness of divinity in nature, (4) mythically larger than life, (5) motivational, with an enduring legacy, and (6) a countercultural adherence to nature.[8] These indicators allowed me to examine whether Saint Marguerite could be considered an ecological saint, and, in applying a "green gaze,"[9] I realized we could repeat this process with numerous beloved saints. If people already have a devotion to a particular saint, perhaps they can be inspired by the ecological witness of that saint to protect creation and take environmental action. However, rather than populate a book myself with dozens of applications of the green gaze on various saints, I wanted to invite women who also consider themselves to be part of the green generation to each contribute a chapter. Having been recently mentored through the publication process by my co-editor Kathleen Deignan on *Teilhard de Chardin: Book of Hours*, I was keen to pass on my newly gained knowledge and create opportunities for emerging scholars, scientists, and sisters to offer reflections on the ecological witness of their beloved saints. These talented authors have exceeded my highest hopes for this project.

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[8] Libby Osgood, "Ecological Saints: Adopting a Green Gaze of the Life and Writings of Saint Marguerite Bourgeoys," *Zygon* 58, no. 3 (2023).

[9] Sally Harper and Wilhelm Johann Jordaan, "Through a Green Gaze: Tentative Indicators of a Green 'Text,'" *Southern African Journal of Environmental Education* 26 (2009): 109–13. I was first introduced to the phrase in an ecological theology course with Elizabeth Johnson at Fordham University in 2018. One of the graduate students in the course discussed adopting a "green gaze."

The chapters are presented in historical order, unfolding from the earliest saints who walked this earthly journey to the ecological witnesses who are alive today. In the first chapter, Flora x. Tang, a PhD candidate at the University of Notre Dame in peace studies and theology, connects how the desert mothers and our own mothers can inspire everyday ecological practices. Next, Céire Kealty, a PhD candidate in theological ethics and Christian spirituality at Villanova University, illustrates how Saint Clare of Assisi's connection to textiles impels us to examine our own relationship with garments and compulsive consumerism.

Continuing chronologically, Sister Jessi Beck, PBVM, a teacher and spiritual director, explains how the creation-centered spiritual practices of Saint Ignatius of Loyola can help us to discern environmentally appropriate actions and provide hope in times of despair. Amirah Orozco, a PhD student in systematic theology at the University of Notre Dame, explores how songbirds, shimmering desert landscape, and roses in an early account of Our Lady of Guadalupe inspire ecological conversion in light of Latina ecofeminist trends.

Then, Sister Cecilia Ashton, OCD, a graduate student at Villanova University and former dentist, offers a chapter on the revelatory capacity of the universe through the teachings of John of the Cross. Next, I offer a chapter demonstrating how humility is an ecological virtue, particularly in the witness of Saint Marguerite Bourgeoys, the first educator of Montreal, the foundress of the first uncloistered congregation in North America, and the first female saint of Canada.

Moving to chapters on ecological witnesses, LaRyssa D. Herrington, a doctoral candidate in systematic theology at the University of Notre Dame, explores the return to black embodiment through the ecological imagination of Toni Morrison, an American novelist who converted to Catholicism at the age of twelve.

Next, Kaitlyn Lightfoot, a graduate student at Acadia University, shares the Indigenous themes in the writings of Thomas Merton.

Sister Réjane Cytacki, SCL, who studied anthropology and earth literacy, writes about Sister Paula Gonzalez, SC, as a prophetic voice of ecological awareness. Then, Elizabeth Iwunwa, an MBA and psychology graduate, offers a chapter about the life and valiant witness of Ken Saro-Wiwa, a Nigerian writer, environmental activist, and Earth martyr. She explores crude oil and its relationship to Nigeria's history, economy, and environment; the cost to the people and generations to come; and the consequences of speaking truth to power.

The penultimate chapter is authored by Rhonda Miska, a preacher and lay ecclesial minister, who presents the theology and ongoing pastoral practice of Sister Laura Vicuña Pereira Manso, CF, and the ecological witness of the martyrs of the Amazon. Last, Ronnie Noonan-Birch, a Catholic marine scientist, writes about biodiversity as a call for ecological conversion for every person of faith.

Through these chapters we emerging theologians, environmental scientists, religious sisters, and women of faith offer different perspectives on who the green saints might be. We write this book for our mothers and aunts, nieces and grandmothers. We offer it to our fathers, uncles, and brothers, and to honor the generations who contributed before us, believing that many will come after us. We write in gratitude for the lessons passed down to us from our ancestors, teachers, and saints, and we write for the future ecological saints who may be inspired to act.

Pierre Teilhard de Chardin wrote his spiritual guide, *The Divine Milieu*, for "the waverers," the people whose "education or instinct leads them to listen primarily to the voices of the Earth" but who also perceive that this no longer aligns with the "Christian religious ideal."[10] Though *The Divine Milieu* was

[10] Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *The Divine Milieu* (New York: Harper & Row, 1960), 43.

published in 1960, a similar misalignment is prevalent today as society continues to evolve, yet perceptions of faith change more slowly. Thus, we write to wake up the people in the pews and inspire them to action. We also write to encourage those who are walking on trails through forests and for those who seek partners on the journey. We scientists, theologians, and sisters write because we must take action. Our spirits tell us that hope cannot be contained; it must be shared, broadly and boundlessly, and with haste.