

Integral Ecology: Profiles in Witness

Review of

Green Saints for a Green Generation

Edited by Libby Osgood, CND

Foreword by Elizabeth A. Johnson

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Reviewed by **Deborah Pope Kehoe**

In her Foreword to this book (ix-xiv), Elizabeth A. Johnson describes *Green Saints for a Green Generation* as “a gem of a project being carried out” (ix). The use of the progressive verbal form is an apt choice for this prelude to a collection of twelve essays by twelve writers in which the unifying focus is the ongoing responsibility of human beings to protect and preserve the natural world. Yet, according to many people, such as those whose voices we hear in this book, that duty has been woefully neglected for decades across the planet, with devastating consequences, that, if not checked, will continue to worsen.

While such call-outs by those who are sensitive to environmental abuse are nothing new in this era, *Green Saints for a Green Generation* offers what many readers may find an inspiring and provocative approach to the cause of ecological justice. The book’s extraordinary qualities enhance its message, a message rooted in *Laudato Si’*, the 2015 encyclical in which Pope Francis exhorts us all to care for our common home.

The book’s appearance is striking. The cover displays a painting by Jenn Norton called “Beatitudes,” vividly depicting the natural world in participation with Christ in delivering The Sermon on the Mount. Framed in forest green, this eye-catching image implies the book’s intentions to address environmental issues creatively and in a context of Gospel teachings.

Also noteworthy is the book’s title, *Green Saints for a Green Generation*. The use of the indefinite article suggests an inclusive approach, one that does not single out a particular demographic as having the most concern for the environment. The practice of praying for a cleaner and healthier natural world, of course, has no age restrictions. However, the indisputable truth is that the younger generations have inherited an eco-crisis that they did not cause but must contend with. Older generations may acknowledge and bemoan the struggles of the young and join them in their efforts to heal the Earth today in hopes of securing the future. But only the younger generations really know what it means to embody that existential threat. Therefore, it makes sense to this reader that none of the twelve authors of these essays was born before 1980, making the book an energizing work of

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generational solidarity by a cohort of visionaries with a common perspective, what Libby Osgood, CND – editor and contributor – calls a “green gaze” (xxii).

Another distinguishing trait shared by the authors of these essays is their deep spirituality. Among the twelve contributors, four are sisters in religious congregations; five are either students or professors of advanced theological studies; and three note that they are active in church ministries. Many have affiliations with Catholic institutions, have written for Catholic publications or have sustained interests in Catholic teachings. In various ways, they all perceive that science intersects with religion and religion with politics. Their combined accomplishments and inclinations bring faith and activism together in an unorthodox and fresh approach to an age-old practice of emulating saints and praying for their intercession.

The unorthodoxy is found in the fact that while all of the spiritual role models invoked in the book are called “green saints,” not all of them have been canonized by the Church. Furthermore, the already-recognized saints discussed in the book are being looked at through new, “green-colored” lenses and situated within new contexts. In her Introduction (xv-xxv), Sister Libby Osgood implies that for the purposes of this book, men and women who have made profound and sacrificial efforts to transform the world for good (particularly in the interest of protecting vulnerable life) can and will be declared “saints” (xxi). It will probably come as no surprise to the readers of *The Merton Seasonal* that one of these green saints is Thomas Merton.

Editor Osgood has effectively organized the twelve essays in chronological order, from the earliest-born saints forward. For the purposes of this review, however, a different arrangement is used, one that will group the essays according to the similarities of the saints being discussed, allowing this reviewer to save Thomas Merton for the finale.

To begin, the following four essays focus on individuals who have long been embraced as hallowed figures by the Church. Each essay provides elements of the official narrative of an established saint, but goes on to point to new lessons that can be learned from these old familiar stories, lessons in integral ecology for the contemporary world.

First, in “Weaving and Wearing Creation” (17-31), Céire Kealty (a former ITMS Daggy Scholar) cogently argues that the beloved Saint Clare of Assisi and her charism of voluntary poverty, exemplified in the distinctly humble habits worn by the members of her order, is a source of holy encouragement for today’s green generation. Kealty proposes that devotion to Saint Clare may awaken us to connect excessive consumption of clothing with environmental degradation as well as with the assaults on human dignity wrought by the textile industry throughout the world.

Next, Jesse Beck, PBVM, in the essay titled “Saint Ignatius” and subtitled “Grounding and Guidance in Times of Ecological Crisis” (33-51), tells of how her formal training in Jesuit spirituality led her to view *Spiritual Exercises*, the signature work of this widely revered saint, as a resource not only for deepening her faith but also her relationship with the created world. She provides biographical details to show how Ignatius allowed creation to influence “who he was, what he believed, and how he acted” (34). Sister Jesse further provides an Ignatian-inspired, step-by-step “*Ecological Examen*” to assist those on “the journey to heal the Earth” (43).

Next, the essay “Our Lady of Guadalupe and Juan Diego” by Amirah Orozco (53-68), turns the green gaze to the celebrated first Indigenous saint of the Americas, Juan Diego. Taking a closer look at the well-rehearsed account of the Virgin Mary’s appearance at Guadalupe to Juan Diego, Orozco sees Mary’s miraculous petals as more than a supernatural phenomenon to propel a humble peasant

to go forth in faith. She sees in the flowers the spiritual force of nature that calls all of us “out of ourselves to encounter others and, as a result, the Divine” (61).

In “Clothed in God’s Beauty” (69-90) by Cecilia Ashton, OCD, the author makes a case for the contemporary relevance of the treasured sixteenth-century saint, John of the Cross. Sister Cecilia cites extensive biographical details and quotes generously from his poetry to conclude that the saint’s mystical insights into the interconnectedness of all life rightly place John of the Cross in the canon of green saints for our times.

Finally in this group of essays featuring saints canonized by the Church is Libby Osgood’s “Radical Humility as an Ecological Virtue” (91-110). It centers on Saint Marguerite Bourgeoys, the founder of the Congregation of Notre Dame, of which Sister Libby is a member. She emphasizes Saint Marguerite’s frequent instructions to novices to always be “as little and as unpretentious as pumpkins and cabbages” (98), a disarmingly charming comparison that holds a profound lesson in humility taught by nature.

The following cluster of essays includes examples of holy men and women from the past, *not* formally canonized by the Church, but whose virtuous lives are object lessons for modern society. First, “The Desert Mothers and Our Mothers” (1-16) by Flora X. Tang turns attention to the asceticism of ancient desert dwellers. Tang writes that today’s consumer-driven culture would do well to remember the minimalist, close-to-the-earth lives of our ancestors, so that they may serve as “witnesses in our shared journey toward ecological conversion” (4).

“Live Simply So Others May Simply Live” (151-64) by Sister Réjane Cytacki, SCL focuses on Sister Paula Gonzaléz, SC. According to Sister Réjane, Sister Paula was an avid preacher and teacher of why and how to follow a green lifestyle long before doing so became a movement. In her life as a Sister of Charity, Paula continued to apply her training as a biologist to help others realize the spiritual dimensions of ecological activism.

The next two essays exalt individuals, some with and some without religious affiliations, who were killed within the last century for their resistance to environmental injustice in areas of the world where rampant exploitation of natural resources devastates local ecosystems and their inhabitants.

First, is “Sister Laura Vicuña Pereira Manso and the Martyrs of the Amazon” (181-200) by Rhonda Miska. Miska writes of an epiphanic moment in her life, when participating in a prayer service for the sisters who died in the Amazon Rain Forest at the hands of the logging industry, she was stirred by a rendition of the *Magnificat* sung by Sister Laura. Miska tells of how “the well-known words took on new significance and urgency in the context of the struggle for life, land and dignity in the Amazon” (182).

A similar story is found in “Forest of Flowers” (165-80). The author, Elizabeth Iwunwa, writes about Ken Saro-Wiwa, a Nigerian native who was executed for his sacrificial protest against the oil industry’s abusive treatment of environmental and human life. Iwunwa states that while Saro-Wiwa was “neither Catholic nor canonized,” he is “an ecological witness and a green saint” (167).

The remaining three essays in the book slightly differ in their contributions to the conversation about green saints. First, “Biodiversity as the Call to Become a Green Saint of Today” (201-13) by Ronnie Noonan-Birch, rather than centering on a specific individual as a green role model, pays tribute to creation’s rich diversity. Noonan-Birch writes that such multiplicity represents “the many dimensions of God” (212); therefore, we are all called to venerate and protect it.

“I am Black and Beautiful” (111-33) by LaRyssa D. Herrington also takes a singular tack in adding to the book’s collective purpose. Herrington delivers an impressive literary analysis of the work of the eminent author Toni Morrison. According to Herrington, Morrison fits the description of “green saint” in that her fictional depictions of nature are infused with her identity as a Black Catholic woman in touch with the sacred mysteries and powers of the created world.

The final essay under discussion in this review, “Thomas Merton, Original Unity, and Indigenous Eco-Theology” (135-49) by Kaitlyn Lightfoot, focuses on a single individual who embodies many, if not all, of the qualities of those figures discussed in previous essays. Lightfoot introduces Merton as “not a canonized saint” but an inspirited prolific writer in the areas of “justice, contemplation, [and] the spiritual life” (136). She goes on to define him as “a monk, writer, mystic, poet, social activist, and theologian” (136) and follows up with exquisite excerpts from his writings to illustrate the breadth of his mind and talents. Lightfoot devotes particular attention to Merton’s book *Ishi Means Man*, in which he writes about the Indigenous peoples and the colonialism that, out of the “sin of selfishness,” violated their humanity and annihilated their homeland. Lightfoot concludes by emphasizing that all of the amazing variety that one finds in the life and work of Thomas Merton is rooted one belief: “We are all one.” His inexhaustible faith that unity is the origin and the intended destiny of all created life makes him a green saint for a green generation.

To paraphrase Elizabeth A. Johnson, *Green Saints for a Green Generation* is, indeed, a jewel. It is a gift to those who are already deeply committed to lives of integral ecology and those who may be so inclined but need new sources of encouragement, example and spiritual help to stay the course of caring for our common home.