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Book review: Replenishing the Earth, by Wangari Matthai

Rich Heffern | Dec. 20, 2010 Eco Catholic

REPLENISHING THE EARTH
SPIRITUAL VALUES FOR HEALING
OURSELVES AND THE WORLD
By Wangari Maathai
Published by Doubleday, $13

In our modern world it is easy to feel disconnected from the physical planet we live on. Nobel laureate Wangari Matthai has spent decades working with the Green Belt Movement to help women in rural Kenya plant and sustain millions of trees. With their hands in the dirt, these women often find themselves newly empowered and at home in a way they have never before experienced.

In 2002 Maathai was elected to Kenya's parliament and in 2003 she was appointed deputy minister for the Environment and Natural Resources. She was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2004. She is a Catholic, educated in the United States at St. Mary's University in Kansas.

Matthai's book explains the spirituality that underlies her work in the Green Belt Movement. She writes that a love for the environment is demonstrable in one's lifestyle. It motivates one to take actions for the earth, such as planting trees and nurturing those that are standing. She writes that the spirit of service and volunteerism is at the forefront of the Green Belt Movement. It is the giving of self that characterizes prophets, saints and local heroes.

She writes at length about the power of the tree, documenting the importance of trees in African religion and in the wider world. "In fact, scientists are only now beginning to understand the vast range of services -- natural, social, psychological, ecological and economic -- that forests perform: the water they clean and retain; the climate patterns they regulate; the medicines they contain; the food they supply; the soil they enrich; the carbon they entrap; the oxygen they emit; the species of flora and fauna they conserve; and the peoples whose very physical existence depends on them."

She concludes the book with an essay on activism for the environment. "My final piece of advice is very practical: look at the problem in front of you and try to solve it. Don't peer too far down the road and ask, What can I do then?' for you risk being overhwlemed. I firmly believe that most problems we encounter have a

solution. Although a day may arrive when you come across a problem you cannot address, most of them you will be able to make a contribution to solving."

NCR's Eco Catholic Blog

Eco Catholic is an exploration of the green Catholic imagination and ecological spirituality. Contributors include Rich Heffern, NCR staff writer, columnist and author, and Carol Meyer, executive director of the Sustainable Sanctuary Coalition.

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