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The Garden at the End of the World

by Sr. Rose Pacatte

NCR Today

With the killing of Osama Bin Laden recently, and hearing loud cries of vengeance and tentative affirmations of some strange notion of justice on the television, I could only think of this award-winning documentary about Afghanistan that I saw in April at the Religious Communicators Council (RCC) conference: *The Garden at the End of the World*.

In 2003, Gary Caganoff accompanied Rosemary Morrow to Afghanistan. Both are from Australia. Caganoff is a filmmaker and is Jewish, though more of a social activist than religious, and Morrow is a Quaker, and very much a peaceful activist.

Once there they met with Mahboba Rawi, a refugee to Australia in the 1980s who returned to her country to begin a mission to house and support Afghanistan's women and children. After all, she had made them a promise and this became the name of her outreach: Mahboba's Promise. With her Uncle Haji they work to provide shelter, food, education, and work to women and children.

The first part of the film explores Afghanistan's history and stability just before the beginning of the Soviet invasion, contrasts this with the current situation, and looks at solutions, especially those proposed by Morrow and Mahboba, two women who are committed to the Afghan people and the development of land and sustainability.

From the 1930s to 1979, Afghanistan was a luscious, self-sustaining garden with a growing tourist industry. After thirty years of war, there is little left but hope.

Morrow is a "permaculture aid worker." I admit, I had never heard of permaculture before seeing this film. According to the U.S. Permaculture Institute, (www.permaculture.org) located in Colorado, permaculture is defined as: "an ecological design system for sustainability in all aspects of human

endeavor. It teaches us how to build natural homes, grow our own food, restore diminished landscapes and ecosystems, catch rainwater, build communities and much more."

The biggest challenge to rebuilding Afghanistan after thirty years of war, pillage and the destruction of the land, water sources and what infrastructure did exist, is that the adult male population, the work force, has significantly diminished. Besides those who may have been willing soldiers, men and boys were kidnapped from their homes by factions during these last years and never seen again. The family that formed the basis of the culture has been decimated. The knowledge and experience of farming has been lost for the most part. A country that up to 1978 could feed and sustain itself agriculturally and whose exports created healthy trade relations with other countries now exports opium.

Millions of dollars of aid has been pouring into Afghanistan since 2001 and more since the Karzai government took office in 2004, but due to lack of coordination, education, infrastructure, communications, and even knowledge about accounting and how to fill out forms for funding agencies, the aid is not making a significant, permanent difference.

Mahboba's Promise continues to grow and updates on this project are available, as well as copies of the DVD and a study guide at the Web site for the film.

"The Garden at the End of the World" is a peaceful, informative, hopeful expedition to war-torn Afghanistan. It has won several awards including the Human Rights Award, a joint honor from the World Council of Churches (WACC) and SIGNIS, the international Catholic association for communication, in October 2010.

Morrow is a quietly fascinating person who wrote "The Earth Users Guide to Permaculture" in 2006. She looks to the earth and empowering the local people to rebuild destitute lands; she calls this "localism". These ideas sound very much like those expressed in Catholic social teaching. As for Afghanistan, Morrow and Mahboba believe it can be a garden once again.

For more information on permaculture, visit the Permaculture International Web site.

At the end of the screening at the RCC conference, an inter-religious gathering, all we wanted to do was pray for Afghanistan and its people, for peace. And so we did.

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