


ECOLOGICAL SAINTS: ADOPTING A GREEN GAZE OF THE LIFE AND WRITINGS OF SAINT MARGUERITE BOURGEOYS

by Libby Osgood 

Abstract. During this time of ecological crisis, spiritual guides are needed to provide inspiration and impel action. In the Roman Catholic tradition, saints act as role models and are associated with particular causes, locations, or professions. Who, then, are the ecological saints, whose witness can inspire hope and action in support of the environment? This article explores that question in two ways. First the writings and accounts of saints who are traditionally connected to the environment are examined to produce six indicators of the beliefs, characteristics, and actions of ecological saints. Second, a green gaze is applied to Saint Marguerite Bourgeoys, a seventeenth-century educator who lived in what would become Montreal, Canada, by comparing her writings and accounts of her life to the six indicators of an ecological saint. Identifying more ecological saints can promote environmental responsibility, and the six indicators of an ecological saint can be the lens through which beloved saints are re-examined.

Keywords: ecology; ecospirituality; Laudato Si'; Marguerite Bourgeoys; panentheism; saint; Saint Francis of Assisi

We live in tumultuous times. Globally, we are waking up to the ecological reality of the depletion of the Earth's resources, an inequitable distribution of wealth, and an increasing rate of extinction of species. We are forecasting the impending impact of overpopulation, consumerism, and extreme weather events. We are beginning to acknowledge the environmental and ethical atrocities of colonization of indigenous peoples and their lands, both past and present. We live in a time that demands action, and yet many are immobilized by the weight of the responsibility to address these vast, complex, and interwoven challenges. With such feelings of fear and hopelessness, spiritual guides are sought to illuminate a path, provide hope, and inspire action.

Within (but not exclusive to) the Roman Catholic tradition, *saints* are sources of wisdom and courage, witnessed through their actions, writings,

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and spirituality. They are acknowledged as saints either through an official canonization process or by being traditionally accepted as someone to emulate. Saints are adopted as the *patron* of a particular profession, activity, people, cause, or geographic location either informally by the people or officially through papal proclamation. Pope Francis describes the saints as “a great cloud of witnesses” who impel us “to advance constantly towards the goal” (2018, par. 3). Ecological saints, then, become our inspiration and guides to be more attuned to the needs of the planet, working toward a hope-filled future.

In this time of environmental crisis, who then are the ecological saints who can witness environmental-responsibility? In 1979, Pope John Paul II named Saint Francis of Assisi (1181–1226) as a patron saint of ecology. Through Saint Francis’ life, he demonstrated a great reverence for nature, witnessed by his kindness to animals and descriptions of celestial bodies as his sisters and brothers in the “Canticle of the Creatures” (1999, 1:114). In 2012, Pope Benedict XVI canonized Saint Kateri Tekakwitha (1656–1680), describing her as the “first Native American Saint.” Due to her intimacy with the natural world, she is also regarded as a patron saint of the environment (Petton 2004). In the environmental encyclical *Laudato Si’* and ecological online and print resources, additional saints have been embraced as ecological witnesses, notably Saint Hildegard von Bingen, Saint Thérèse of Lisieux, and numerous Celtic saints. What is it about these saints that suggests a connection to the natural world? Do they possess certain characteristics? Is their *greenness* determined through specific actions or writings?

Employing a “green gaze,” interdisciplinary researchers Sally Harper and Wilhelm Johann Jordaan propose 18 indicators to determine whether a text adopts a *green* worldview (2009, 112). The indicators examine economic, ethical, political, epistemological, and ontological elements of a text, opting for a nonanthropocentric (ecocentric) position. This article employs a similar *green gaze* methodology to propose six indicators of actions, characteristics, and beliefs of ecological saints, derived from the writings, accounts, and witness of previously identified environmental patrons. Then, the ecological indicators are used as a lens to examine the writings and accounts of Saint Marguerite Bourgeoys (1620–1700) to consider whether she too is an ecological saint. By reexamining well-loved saints through an ecological lens, devotees may be inspired to become more environmentally aware and motivated toward action.

Recognizing that the ecological crises cannot be solved by one people, country, or religion, there are numerous environmental sages across traditions and eras who could be included here as ecological witnesses. However, for brevity, this article is limited to a small selection of Catholic saints. This article has four sections: (1) background and positionality to contextualize the article, (2) descriptions of the lives of well-known ecological

saints, (3) presentation of six indicators of an ecological saint, and (4) application of the indicators as a *green gaze* to consider the life and writings of Saint Marguerite Bourgeoys.

BACKGROUND AND POSITIONALITY

To frame this article, a positionality statement provides context on the researcher, documenting their “backgrounds, perspectives, experiences, and biases in an effort to strengthen research quality” (Secules, McCall, and Mejia 2021, 21). This reflexive practice works toward increasing equity within research by acknowledging systemic marginalization and privilege. As a professor of sustainable design engineering and a religious sister, I research the intersection of faith and science. I am a North American, able-bodied woman of European descent, who has lived in deserts, islands, and multiple countries. I have seen the grandeur of Earth, across seas and continents, and witnessed injustice in many forms, rarely experiencing it personally. It is from these deeply conflicting realities that I completed this research, to contribute hope in the world, so that the chasm between beauty and injustice might be lessened.

This article is grounded in two ideals: deep ecology and pantheism. Although *ecology* has elements of interdependence, diversity, and vulnerability (Barbour 1972), the broad term can connote an anthropocentric worldview, focused on how the Earth and creatures within it serve humanity. This human-centered thinking, according to theologian Gordan D. Kaufman, claims that “we humans, unlike all other creatures, were made in the very image of God as the climax of creation” (2003, 149). Rather, *deep ecology* promotes an eco-centric ideal that “wilderness preservation is not *for us* but for life generally...Deep ecology argues for a new appreciation of the relationship between the individual and the whole” (Kinsley 1995, 186). By placing humanity as one part of the greater ecology instead of its apex, the hierarchical *great chain of being*, in which some creatures are believed to be closer to divinity, is dismantled. Humanity, then, is rooted within the ecosphere, and all that is living and nonliving is intrinsically valuable.

The second ideal inherent in the article is *pantheism*, which recognizes divinity in all entities but does not restrict divinity within the material world. In Valera and Vidal (2022), pantheism “conceives God as partially distinct from the natural world,” and deep ecology assumes a pantheistic background, albeit with exceptions (3). Physicist Thomas Maxwell advocates that becoming ecologically aware creates an “awakened state” in which “all of nature is viewed as sacred, as an expression or reflection of the splendor of the One” (2003, 273). It is with this pantheistic and (ecocentric mindset that indicators are developed and the green gaze is applied.

ECOLOGICAL SAINTS

This section chronologically describes saints who are connected to the environment either in papal documents or in multiple Catholic ecological resources. A more extensive list is offered in the Appendix in the Supporting Information.

Celtic Saints

Though by no means exhaustive, select Celtic saints who lived during the fifth to tenth centuries in Ireland and Great Britain are highlighted in this section. The written accounts of the Celtic saints take the form of hagiographies. In this style, Historian Alan Greer explains, “hagiographers tend to lift their subject up out of history in order to place [them] in a celestial realm among other saints” (2005, viii). Rather than attempting to be factual, the mythical nature of the stories amplify the sanctity of the saint.

The hagiographies present the Celtic saints as having an intimate, close connection to the natural world, and therefore they are “well-equipped to be our spiritual mentors in this ecological era” (Santmire 2002, 302). As an example of compassion toward the natural world, when Saint Malo (520–621) was working in a vineyard, a wren used his cloak as a nest. Rather than displace the eggs, he lived without his garment until the chicks were reared (Armstrong 1973). Also, Saint Kevin (d. 618) was seen multiple times with birds as large as blackbirds nestling in his hands and resting on his shoulders while he sang songs to God (Armstrong 1973). Through these encounters, Saints Malo and Kevin demonstrate patience, austerity, and reverence for all creatures.

Appreciating the beauty of birds’ song as the music of heaven, Saint Brendan (484–578) conversed with the birds on the island he discovered, aptly named *Paradise of Birds* (Armstrong 1973). Thus, Saint Brendan found God in and through the natural world. Paul Santmire, a scholar of ecological theology, describes an “intimacy with nature and with God-in-nature then allowed the Celtic saints to call upon the whole creation” (2002, 309). By respecting *all* creation, the Celtic saints demonstrate a nonhierarchical worldview, as Church historian Graham Duncan explains, “there is no hierarchy of reverence here—all are venerated equally” (2015, 6). In this way, Celtic saints demonstrate an (ecocentric worldview, recognizing the intrinsic value of creation. Saint Patrick (d. 461) is famously attributed with presenting the shamrock as an educational tool to convey lessons about the trinity, and his creed declares that God dwells “in heaven and earth and sea, and all things that are in them” (1967, 7). Saint Patrick presents the natural world as a teacher and the incarnational presence of divinity.

The Celtic saints' connection to nature is imbued with myth and legend. For example, wolves watched over the pigs for Saint Brigid of Kildare (451–525), out of their respect for her (Fisher 2019). Similarly collaborative, after a bear killed an ox who was working to help build a church, the bear was instructed by Saint Columban (540–615) to take the ox's place (Armstrong 1973). In addition to hagiographies of the animals listening to Celtic saints, the ancient practice of inflating the holy people includes passages on the elements as well. Saint Columba of Iona (521–597) was said to turn water into wine and calm the seas by his prayers (Duncan 2015, 4), showing his similarity to Christ. In a panentheistic, (ecospiritual framework, water, wine, bears, and wolves all contain aspects of divinity. Through this lens, hagiographies of the Celtic saints witness to a mutual respect for the natural world.

Saint Hildegard von Bingen

The writings, songs, and actions of Saint Hildegard von Bingen (1098–1179) are infused with a relationality to the natural world. In a papal teaching, Pope Benedict XVI (known as the “Green Pope” for his actions on climate change) described Saint Hildegard's gifts for the natural sciences, medicine, and art (2010). Saint Hildegard lived in Germany, had mystical visions, and became prioress of her abbey. She wrote extensively about her observations of nature, including animals, birds, fish, herbs, trees, and gem stones (Newman 1998). Her spirituality is infused in these scientific studies, for example, in “Scivias” she likens the sap of a tree to the soul of a body (1990, 124). For her, observing the natural world is a religious experience (Mews 1998).

In her “Book of Divine Works,” she describes 10 visions that help human beings to “learn how to know their Creator” (1987, 6). In the first vision on the origin of life, she heard a voice from heaven say, “I, the fiery life of divine essence, am aflame beyond the beauty of the meadows, I gleam in the waters, and I burn in the sun, moon, and stars. With every breeze...I awaken everything to life” (1987, 8). Every element of the natural world is infused with divinity, not just at creation but each and every day.

For Saint Hildegard, *viriditas*, or *greenness*, is foundational to her spirituality, demonstrating a direct connection to nature. Greenness is the “the energy of life evident in grasses, trees, flowers, and vineyards” (Edwards 2017, 96). Mary, the mother of Jesus, is described as the “greenest” branch to allow redemption to blossom (Marder 2021, 15). The Holy Spirit acts as the green finger of God (Edwards 2017, 96). Christ is a flower that will forever blossom (Marder 2021, 38). Saint Hildegard's theology is deeply rooted in the self-refreshing life force of greenness.

Compared to her contemporaries, Saint Hildegard created uniquely verdant terminology and demonstrated radically *green* spirituality. However, she affirmed the medieval understanding of humanity's dominion over nature, which is inherently hierarchical. Medical historian Florence Eliza Glaze explains, "Hildegard depicts the human creature as integrally connected with the universe, both reflecting it and yet having dominion over it" (1998, 134). In a modern (ecocentric worldview, *dominion over* the Earth is interpreted as a responsibility of *stewardship* for the whole natural world. However, the ecological witness of Hildegard remains intact, as when considering the lives of the saints, Pope Francis explains, "we do not need to get caught up in details...What we need to contemplate is the totality of their life, their entire journey of growth in holiness," (2018, par. 22). With this mindset, Saint Hildegard models how to observe the natural world intensely and to seek divinity through the Earth.

Saint Francis of Assisi

Saint Francis of Assisi (1181–1226) was born in Italy and is integrally linked to the environment, through his companionship with animals, preaching to the birds, gently admonishing a wolf, and songs praising creation. His example is lauded in 10 paragraphs of the papal environmental encyclical *Laudato Si'*, namely, for his awe-filled appreciation for creatures and creation (2015, par. 1, 66, 125, 221), his devotion to the marginalized (par. 10, 11, 91), his recognition of the Earth as a place where God exists and speaks (par. 12, 87), and his adherence to personal growth (par. 218). The witness of Saint Francis encouraged many followers, as he set out to rebuild the church through action rather than word (Zhang 2016).

Accounts of Saint Francis were recorded by his contemporaries, and his canticles, letters, and teachings were assembled from two hand-written notes, scribes' dictations, and manuscripts of early followers. For example, the "Canticle to Creation" (1225) was composed at three different points in Saint Francis' life, which was recorded in the notes of scribes (1999, 2:185–188). The canticle itself demonstrates Saint Francis' reverence for all creation, such as in the following excerpt: "Praised be You, my Lord, with all Your creatures, especially Sir Brother Sun, Who is the day and through whom You give us light...through our Sister Mother Earth, who sustains and governs us," (1999, 1:114). Bestowing honorific titles to the Sun and the Earth connotes Saint Francis' respect for creation, and Earth's governance denotes a reciprocal, interdependent relationship within all creation. The mutuality takes on greater meaning because Saint Francis returned to the canticle multiple times through his life, to refine it and better express his praise.

Myriad sources affirm Saint Francis as the patron saint of ecology, including Lynn White in his foundational environmental essay "The

Historical Roots of our Ecological Crisis” (2004). “Francis tried to depose man from his monarchy over creation and set up a democracy of all God’s creatures” (White 2004, 200). What makes Saint Francis stand out is his counterculturalness, so at odds with his contemporaries. His belief in a nonhierarchical, ecocentric worldview and overall reverence for nature is reminiscent of Celtic beliefs. Ornithologist and Anglican priest, Edward A. Armstrong (1973) suggests that Saint Francis was influenced by Irish pilgrims coming through Assisi, drawing parallels in how the Celtic saints and Saint Francis find divinity in the natural world, preach to animals, are itinerant, and perform charitable acts.

Saint Francis’ radical devotion to all creation is integrally connected to his religious beliefs. Armstrong explains, “His tenderness toward animals was an expression of his dedication to Christ...Neither [hu]men nor worms were excluded. In thinking of him as one who loved nature, we must not lose sight of the man who served Lady Poverty, tended the diseased, and risked or even sought martyrdom” (Armstrong 1973, 7). Saint Francis is a witness to serving all creatures and recognizing the interconnectedness of creation.

Selected Medieval Saints

In the papal encyclical *Laudato Si’*, Pope Francis highlights the ecological witness of more than ten saints, three of whom are included in this section. Saint Bonaventure (1221–1274) is lauded for his ability to “discover God in all things” (2015, par. 233), demonstrating pantheistic beliefs in which the divine is not separate from creation (Kinsey 1995) but is found *in* and *through* creation. Further, Saint Bonaventure describes the incarnation of divinity in the world through the connection of Christ to the natural world, “for Christ, as a human being, shares with all creatures; Indeed he possesses being with rocks, lives among the plants, senses with animals, and understands with angels.” (Bonaventure 2008, 217). This passage connotes the hierarchal worldview of *great chain of being*, reflecting the contemporary belief of his time-period. Though this may not align with the ecocentric worldview that Saint Francis of Assisi espoused, the influence of Saint Francis is apparent in their shared search for divinity in all of creation.

“The Little Way” of Saint Thérèse of Lisieux (1873–1897) is offered in *Laudato Si’* as a guide towards kindness, breaking away from patterns of exploitation or violence that propagate harm in our interconnected world (2015, par. 230). Her religious beliefs were influenced by reading “the book of nature,” in which the flowers and trees embody spiritual lessons (1976, 14). She explains that Jesus’ garden is the *world of souls*, in which “He willed to create great souls comparable to Lilies and roses, but He has created smaller ones and these must be content to be daisies or violets

destined to give joy to God's glances when He looks down at His feet. Perfection consists in doing His will, in being what He wills us to be" (1976, 14). Saint Thérèse points to nature for spiritual instruction, and her witness of *the little way* offsets what can feel like an overwhelming responsibility to solve ecological challenges. She provides hope and courage to take simple actions.

Saint John of the Cross (1542–1591) is commended in *Laudato Si'* for his recognition that "all things" are intimately connected to God (2015, par. 234). Saint John's reverence for the natural world is apparent in his descriptions of nature in his spiritual canticle, "Song of the Soul and the Bridegroom." While describing a personal search for God, he poetically expresses admiration for the mountains, flowers, wooded valleys, islands, dawn, and foxes. In his explanation of the canticle, Saint John of the Cross quotes Saint Francis of Assisi to describe how the soul finds God through the natural elements of the world: "for in the ecstatic communications of God the soul feels and understands the truth of the saying of Saint Francis 'God is mine, and all things are mine'" (1919, 107–108). The awe and reverence for the natural world in his writings connote his ecological mentality.

Saint Kateri Tekakwitha

Saint Kateri Tekakwitha (1656–1680) is recognized as a patron saint of the environment by popular acclamation in ecological resources. The Saint Kateri Conservation Center (2022) specifies that she is the patron saint of *traditional* ecology, embracing her indigenous heritage. Born to a Mohawk father and an Algonquin mother in what has become upstate New York, Saint Kateri was raised by her aunts and an uncle after her parents perished from a smallpox outbreak. After Saint Kateri's conversion to Christianity by Jesuit missionaries, she moved near Montreal to the Saint Francis Xavier Mission, which anthropologist Paula Elizabeth Holmes describes as the oldest Iroquois reserve in today's Canada (2001, 89).

What is known about Saint Kateri comes from the writings of priests Claude Chauchetière and Pierre Cholenec, as hagiographies. The persuasive nature of hagiography is "to impart larger spiritual, social, or even political visions of the world" (Rowe 2016, 732). Written in a time when European royalty provided charters "to exploit the natural resources of Canada" (Kittler 1964, 17), little attention was given to Saint Kateri's connection to the environment. In fact, her biographers saw the forest as "almost entirely evil, the dark haunt of demons and pagan[s]" (Greer 2005, 131). In the seventeenth century, nature was a resource, something to dominate in order to spur on progress (Kinsley 1995). In contrast to the cultured civilization of towns and missions, nature represented the frightening unknown. Thus, Saint Kateri's biographers were not focused on her

connection to nature. Rather they heralded her conversion, her vow of virginity, and her self-mortification practices as the signs of her holiness.

More recently, Saint Kateri has been recognized and promoted as the “Catholic face of North American indigeneity” (Rose 2020, 135). She is embraced an ecological saint, because of her indigenoussness and her implied connection to nature. Her ecological witness can be observed by searching for ecological elements implicit in her biographies, such as descriptions of the annual hunt, gathering firewood as a child, and being drawn to the forest to pray (Greer 2005). These vignettes are complemented with practices traditionally associated with indigenous culture, such as gathering of herbs for medicines, helping in the fields, and retreating to the woods for spiritual ceremonies (Greer 2005). Chief Oren Lyons, Faithkeeper of the Onondaga Nation, writes about practices of thanksgiving, prayer, song, and ceremony. He asks “How do you inspire respect for something? By giving thanks, by doing it” (Chief Oren Lyons, 2016, 18). This demonstrates an intimacy and mutual interdependence with the natural world. Similarly, Luther Standing Bear, a Lakota educator, philosopher, and author, describes “kinship with all creatures,” within which the animals have rights to freedom, protection, and humanity’s indebtedness (2004, 39). Robin Wall Kimmerer, a botanist and enrolled member of the Citizen Potawatomi Nation, explains, humans “are referred to as the younger brothers of creation, so like younger brothers, we must learn from our elders. Plants were here first and have had a long time to figure things out” (2015, 346). Kimmerer describes offerings of sacred tobacco when harvesting as signs of reciprocity with the Earth, and she promotes honorable harvesting to ensure long-term sustainability of the crop and creatures who rely on it. The witness and totality of Saint Kateri’s life continues to inspire people today, to seek a closer mutual relationship with the Earth and to find God in nature.

The next section proposes six indicators that are developed from the beliefs, characteristics, and actions of ecological saints.

INDICATORS OF ECOLOGICAL SAINTS

This section does not attempt to prescribe or restrict what it means to be an ecological saint, nor is *scoring* of the indicators suggested. Rather, the indicators connote shared beliefs, characteristics, and actions of saints who are embraced as ecological and are offered as a lens to seek out the ecocentric resonances for a particular saint. We need more ecological witnesses, to inspire more action.

The six indicators are presented in list-form followed by detailed explanations:

- (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
- (6) Countercultural adherence to nature

An *intimate, interdependent relationship with the environment* was evident in nearly all of the ecological saints. More than respect or appreciation for the natural world, an intimate *relationship* implies two entities interacting, such as legends of Saints Brendan and Francis of Assisi preaching to the birds. They spent time with the birds in a mutual back-and-forth. Saint Kateri likely embodied thanksgiving and reciprocity, as well as ceremonies. Servant of God Black Elk, a Lakota holy man, describes the reciprocal relationship between the sun and creation, “As the flames of the sun come to us in the morning, so comes the grace of *Wakan-Tanka*, by which all creatures are enlightened” (Elk 2004, 539). An interdependent, mutuality recognizes that everything and everyone are connected. Saints Patrick, Hildegard, and Francis of Assisi wrote songs praising creation, through which they describe the interrelatedness of all beings. Essentially, this indicator embodies an ecocentric worldview.

Frequent immersion in the natural world requires removing oneself from the human-constructed world to seek the forests, gardens, mountains, and seas. More than enjoying a beautiful view, this point reflects a craving to be surrounded by the natural world, evident in the witness of Saint Kateri who went to the forest to pray, in Saint Francis of Assisi who retreated to a cave on a mountain, and in the desert mothers and fathers. More than a desire to withdraw from the human-created world, being immersed in the natural world is an intense longing. Luther Standing Bear, a Lakota educator, philosopher, and author, describes learning “to sit or lie on the ground and become conscious of life about us in its multiple forms...[to] sit motionless and watch the swallow, the tiny ants...to ponder on its industry and ingenuity” (2004, 40). Feeling similarly impelled to sit and watch, Saint Hildegard observed the natural world with an all-encompassing attentiveness. Essentially, this indicator summarizes the call to be present in and with the natural world.

An *awareness of divinity in nature* is a recognition of the sacredness in each element and organism. It is an understanding of incarnationalism, deeper than an appreciation for living things. It is an active *seeking*, intricately linking spirituality to the world. For example, Saint Patrick conveyed the trinity through the shamrock, and Saint Thérèse of Lisieux saw *the little way* in the diversity of flowers. They sought guidance in nature, and then held the natural world as a mirror for others understand. Saints John of the Cross and Bonaventure wrote about their awareness of divinity inherent in the natural world, which paleontologist and priest Pierre

Teilhard de Chardin describes as the *cosmic sense*. According to Teilhard, the cosmic sense is the “affinity that binds us psychologically to the All which envelops us,” and it is found through “facing the forest, the sea and the stars” (1969, 82). In this way, nature is a guide to understanding incarnation. Essentially, this indicator embraces a pantheistic belief.

To be *mythically larger than life* may seem out of place in an ecological framework. However, many of the ecological saints have interesting legends, anchored more in myth more than in history. These narratives are an integral part of their allure, such as the legends of the wolves who listened to Saints Brigid and Francis of Assisi or the bear who moved stones for St Columban. The myths could be instructional, showing how our natural instincts can be controlled through the virtue of patience (Armstrong 1973), or they could be appreciated as “sacred narrative explaining how the world and [humanity] came to be in their present form” (Dundes 1984, 1). This indicator, inherent in hagiographies, highlights how inspirational the person is and why they are considered a saint. For example, the account of Saint Malo allowing the wren to nest in his cowl demonstrates his kindness and offers guidance to be compassionate. Essentially, this indicator reflects the potential to provide hope and courage.

To be *motivational with an enduring legacy* implies both a desire and an ability to inspire others. While the previous point addresses the legacy of a person, how their narrative is told or how they are remembered, this point considers their concrete actions, their intentions, and what is within their control. For example, Saint Hildegard wrote to instruct and help others on topics such as medicine, natural sciences, and theology. Saint Columba of Iona made copies of the gospel to distribute, and he built churches and monasteries. Saint Francis of Assisi was called to rebuild the church, and he inspired a large following, including the establishment of religious communities for men and women. Inherent in the actions of the ecological saints is a desire and ability to motivate others, to spread a message. Thomas Berry, a cultural historian and priest, explains, the “Great Work” of our time is “to initiate and guide this next creative moment of the story of the Earth” (Berry 2009, 87). Saints have the ability to stimulate action and the boldness to proclaim great truths, which is why they are relied upon as sages and guides. Essentially, this indicator addresses the desire to move beyond the self to prophetically spread a message and inspire others.

A *countercultural adherence to nature* implies a belief or action that goes beyond the *status quo*. Saints make history, not because they reflect the thought of their day, but rather because they speak with prophetic voices. Saint Francis of Assisi was described as a radical, and his ecocentric, pantheistic beliefs reflect his willingness to stand apart. Saint Kateri was part of a small group of indigenous women who bridged two societies: their Mohawk communities and Catholic New France. Servant of God Thea Bowman, a teacher and activist, speaks counterculturally by confronting

Table 1. Indicators of an ecological saint

Indicator	Examples and description
An intimate, interdependent relationship with the environment	Preaching to birds Song <i>to</i> creation All about relationship Ecocentric worldview
Frequent immersion in the natural world	Craving to be in natural world Observation nature Call to be present in and with the natural world
Awareness of divinity in nature	Sacredness in each element Seeking divinity through natural world Teaches lessons with symbols from nature Incarnation/panteistic
Mythically larger than life	Legends of kindness to animals Hagiographies and myths Inspires stories Potential to provide hope and courage
Motivational, with an enduring legacy	Desire and ability to inspire others Work to instruct and help others Established communities of followers Move beyond self to spread message and inspire others
Countercultural adherence to nature	Belief or action that goes beyond <i>status quo</i> Make history, radical Being the lone voice in the wilderness

consumerism, proclaiming, “take your share and leave the rest for others. If we live cooperatively the Earth produces sufficiently to feed and shelter us all” (Bowman 2009, 6). Essentially, this indicator advocates for being the *lone voice in the wilderness* (Isaiah 40:3).

Table 1 succinctly summarizes the indicators. Looking across the framework, four of the indicators are ecologically pointed and two could apply to any saint (larger than life and motivational). The two more generic saintly indicators are included so this green gaze can be applied to ecological witnesses and sources of inspiration outside of the traditional canon of saints. For example, Berta Cáceres, an Indigenous Honduran earth defender, was assassinated in 2016 while protecting her ancestral land from the installation of a hydroelectric dam. Though Global Witness (2022) found that 1733 land defenders were killed between 2012 and 2021, Bertha’s influence is uniquely widespread with an enduring legacy. Thus, the indicator for being motivational is a valuable identification of her ecological witness. The next section examines Saint Marguerite Bourgeoys’ writings and accounts of her life through an ecological lens, applying the six indicators of ecological saints as a framework.

GREEN GAZE OF SAINT MARGUERITE BOURGEOYS

Saint Marguerite Bourgeoys

Saint Marguerite Bourgeoys (1620–1700) was born in Troyes, France and is known for many firsts. She was the first teacher of what would become Montreal, Canada having arrived in Ville-Marie in 1653 and opened the first school on the Island of Montreal in 1658. She founded the first unclloistered community of religious sisters in North America: the *Congrégation de Notre-Dame de Montréal* (hereafter named the *congregation*), whose members were not bound to a convent but preferred to go on mission as *filles de paroisse* or “women of the parish” (Bourgeoys 1976, 73). She was the first female Canadian saint and was canonized in 1982 by Pope John Paul II. He highlighted her work with families, couples, and children (1982, no. 3).

As there were just over 200 residents of Ville-Marie when Saint Marguerite arrived in 1653 (Simpson 1997, 156), there were many opportunities for “firsts”. By the time of her death on January 12, 1700, the population had grown to nearly 1200 people (Statistics of Canada 1876). Accounts of her sainthood began immediately after her death according to her first biographer Charles de Glandelet, who was a priest and friend of Saint Marguerite. He related an account from a “distinguished clergyman of Canada” who stated, “If the saints were canonized today as they were in olden times, tomorrow we would be saying the mass of St Marguerite of Canada” (1977, 86).

Documentation of her life is found in a collection of her writings “*Les Écrits*,” which was translated to English in 1976 and contain her “autobiography and spiritual testament,” much of which was written during a tumultuous and dark period of her life (Bourgeoys 1976, xiii). Original copies of her writings were lost in fires and partially reconstructed as her writings were cited in her early biographies. In 1701, Glandelet published a summary of the written and oral communications he had with Saint Marguerite, and he expanded this in 1715 to include her writings and information from religious sisters in the congregation (1977; 1994). Patricia Simpson, a historian and religious sister of the congregation, describes Glandelet’s “intention is to convey his understanding of her spirituality and sanctity” (1997, 7). Thus, his accounts can be read as hagiographies. Simpson wrote two volumes on Saint Marguerite, drawing from “*Les Écrits*,” historical documents, letters, and earlier biographies (1997, 2005).

Numerous biographies (Glandelet; Burton; Quigley; Simpson) and narrative accounts of her life (Poissant; Sister St. Mary Genevieve) identify Saint Marguerite’s humility, charity, and courage, but there are very few passages about her relationship with the natural world. Ville-Marie was founded as a new utopia by the *Société de Notre-Dame de Montréal*,

whose members sought to “work in every possible way to help one’s neighbour without causing him any harm” (Poinsenet 1954, 244). The Island of Montreal was selected because of its location where the St Lawrence and Ottawa rivers meet (Simpson 1997, 74). As a contemporary of Saint Kateri, who lived further down the Saint-Lawrence River on the opposite shore from Ville-Marie, it has been established that the colonists viewed nature as a wilderness to be conquered, cultivated, and exploited. Residents both feared the natural world as an opponent and relied on it for survival and industry. Loggers, trappers, fishers, farmers, soldiers, and their families fought against threats of starvation to survive the harsh winters and possible starvation. The wilderness was also seen as a hiding place for enemies of on-going wars with the English and various indigenous nations (Sister St. Mary Genevieve 1963, 165), so for safety, residents stayed within the fort walls of Ville-Marie. Saint Marguerite’s early biographers, then, were more likely to focus on her charity and less likely to notice the natural elements contained in her writings, such as the creatures, beavers, cattle, dogs, doves, eels, flowers, fruit, plants, remora, seeds, and living water (Bourgeois 1976).

Writing to her sisters in the congregation, theologian Kathleen Deignan explains that Saint Marguerite has a “nature-rooted spirituality” apparent in her “many ecological exhortations” (2019, 1; 7). Deignan provides a list of “green threads lacing through” Saint Marguerite’s writings, and she points to the “rule” for the congregation as being both founded in the creation story and a call to cultivate a “New Creation” (2019, 8; 1). Taken from the writings of Saint Marguerite, the “rule” is as follows:

The rule for this community and for everyone is the one God gave from the creation of the world : “You shall love God with all your heart and your neighbor as yourself.”

This word has gone out through all the Earth for it is said that He will send forth His fire winging to the ends of the world...that all creatures, angels, men, animals, inanimate objects, will say each in their own tongue : ‘It is not we who have made ourselves; God has given us being.’ The sun proclaims this truth, that unless its Creator sustained it, it would fall back into nothingness. The rocks tell that they receive their firmness and strength from God. The smallest creatures repeat the same in a language which is mute to [hu]men, but heard by their Creator. (1976, 180).

From this passage, Saint Marguerite links all of creation in the timeless mission to share God’s love, evoking ecocentric, panentheistic, and ecological tones. A footnote to the passage explains that the second paragraph is found in only one of the historical copies of the writings, as it was recalled from a passage that was lost in the 1893 fire. Whether or not the second paragraph was actually composed by Saint Marguerite, the reference to creation in first paragraph warrants an examination of her life and writings using an ecological lens. Paying particular attention to the “green

laces” provided by Deignan, the writings and accounts of Saint Marguerite are presented below, guided by the six indicators of an ecological saint.

An Intimate, Interdependent Relationship with the Environment

The theme of creation and creatures is found throughout her writings, notably describing Mary mother of Jesus twice as a “blessed creature” (1976, 57; 66). Given Saint Marguerite’s devotion to Mary, for example, naming the congregation after her, acknowledging Mary as a *creature* denotes the great respect Saint Marguerite had for everyone and everything. For Saint Marguerite, all are creatures having been created by God and collectively acknowledged as creation (1976, 52–54; 106; 180; and so on). She states, “the Eternal Father resolved to create the world. He created it with all the elements and all the other entities that are to be found in creation” (1976, 61). Even the elements are included in her ecocentric interpretation of the world.

Her intimacy with the natural world is seen in the personalities that she ascribes to pumpkins and cabbages. During the clothing ceremony in which new sisters were given a habit, Saint Marguerite instructed the women to also don the simplicity of garden plants. She explains, “Dear sisters, be always little and poor. All your lives...Be always little and as unpretentious as pumpkins and cabbages” (1976; 69). In this passage she not only recognizes but extols the character of the plants.

Saint Marguerite’s respect for creation is witnessed in her rejection of consumerism. She turned away from her self-described “frivolous” attraction to “pretty clothes” (1976, 163), which was common in seventeenth-century France, to instruct her sisters that “we must possess nothing of our own and be content with what we are given in community for our food, our clothing, our room, our furniture and for everything else” (97). She was a model of gracefully accepting simplicity during her second voyage to France, when she mistakenly found herself “without money, without clothes” and had to use “sail-cloth for a straw mattress” for the 31-day voyage (37). She even used the cloth to make a shirt, wasting nothing.

Finally, as a woman of her time living in New France, she was reliant on the crops of the earth to survive the winters as supplies from France were infrequent. She was part of a society that participated in logging and clearing the land, but she preached prudence to take less than what is needed (1976, 91). In one instance after a series of disasters, she lamented the loss of corn, meadows, and a large number of cattle (1976, 36), acknowledging the interdependence of humanity and nature.

Frequent Immersion in the Natural World

Awe-filled descriptions of New France comment on how “enormous” everything is, making French trees, animal, and rivers “seem like a miniature”

(Kittler 1964, 28). Though it was often too perilous to go into the forest for fear of attack (Simpson 1997, 160), each day Saint Marguerite was immersed in the natural world as she lived in a converted stable, taught women how to grow crops, and tended animals. As the congregation expanded, she travelled on canoes in summer, on foot in spring, and through snow in the winter traversing rivers, forests, and mountains (Simpson 2005, 24). By sending her sisters on mission into the rustic countryside, she encouraged their immersion in the natural world, bringing nothing with them and relying on others for sustenance. She writes “Is St. Francis reproached for having his friars go barefoot?” (1976, 6), thus aligning her austerity with his example.

Shortly after arriving in Ville-Marie, she undertook a pilgrimage to restore a large cross on the mountain to consecrate the New World to Mary (Quigley 1982, 44). Marguerite considered this site to be a prophetic and holy place (Simpson 1997, 114), demonstrating how she is drawn there, with a desire to be immersed in the natural world.

Saint Marguerite’s writings are lush with observations of the natural world, including a vivid passage on resiliency in which she compares “a snowflake which falls in the shape of a star and melts at the least warmth to a star in the firmament” (1976, 81). She described two aspects of small remora fish: how they attach themselves to larger fish for their survival and how the small fish can stop a large vessel (1976, 58–59). In the seven times that she crossed the Atlantic Ocean, she would have accumulated over a year at sea. Whether at sea, traversing New France, or tending to the fields, Saint Marguerite was often present in and with the natural world.

Awareness of Divinity in Nature

To Saint Marguerite, God is everywhere and present in all creation. She explains that “God speaks to us through preachers and through readings, by all His creatures and by His precepts” (1976, 169). She instructs sisters of the congregation to live in a state of continual prayer and always “in the holy presence of God” (Glandelet 1994, 112; Bourgeoys 1976, 73), and she describes the sisters of the congregation as being “watered continually by the rain and waters of heavenly grace” (63). Thus, God is everywhere, *and* everywhere is holy.

Saint Marguerite saw the world as her classroom. Recall her previous lessons on the humility of pumpkins, the wisdom and impact of remoras, and the endurance of stars compared to snowflakes. She describes a spring of crystal clear water as an example of charity “springing up from the fountains of the Saviour and refreshing all who come to it” (1976, 64). To teach about how to receive the “Word of God,” she points to seeds and concludes, “When the heart is open to the sun of grace, we see flowers blossom in their fragrance” (1976, 205). In one verdant passage, she proclaims

“all Chrisendom is a vast garden created by God,” and the congregation is “one of those little squares the Gardener has kept for Himself in order to set out many plants differing in colour, taste, and fragrance. He takes great care to clear, till, and enrich the soil. He watches over the seeds... Let us strive, then, to cultivate flowers and fruits worthy to be presented to Him” (Glandelet 1994, 63). The passage conveys both her nonhierarchical worldview, as all flowers are equally cared for in the garden, and the tenderness she sees in God as the “Gardener” who models how to care for plants, and by extension, all of creation. Through the example of water, seeds, and flowers, she saw the divine Gardener in all of creation.

Mythically Larger Than Life

Saint Marguerite performed many incredible feats in her lifetime, and she could be described as *indefatigable*, perhaps mythically so. At the age of 69 (Noel 2013), Saint Marguerite walked 60 leagues (180 miles) from Montreal to Quebec City during winter, “on foot, sometimes on ice where she dragged herself on her knees sometimes in water and sometimes in snow” (Simpson 2005, 123). In her writings, Saint Marguerite described surviving an earthquake with eight aftershocks, caring for passengers on plague-filled ships, being stranded on an island, and surviving violent storms crossing the sea (1976, 23; 25; 31).

She was not afraid of the elements, nor was she afraid of kidnappers. In one tale, while at sea returning from France in 1672 during a time of war, their ship was being pursued by four ships with 36 canons, and Saint Marguerite assured those around her that “if we are captured, we will go to England or Holland where we will find God as we find Him everywhere else” (Montgolfier 1880, 110). Also, while teaching in Troyes as a young adult, Saint Marguerite protected a young woman from being abducted, as she reportedly ran down the street with a crucifix in hand, admonishing the armed attackers (Fallion 1853, 20). A religious sister who was present for the “brazen action” recounted the story of bravery in a letter to the congregation upon the heroic saint’s passing.

Saint Marguerite’s biographer Simone Poissant explains, “According to an unbroken oral tradition, already begun in her lifetime, extraordinary favours were attributed to her prayers,” such as a flour bag and cask of wine that never diminished until more supplies arrived during a particularly harsh winter in 1660 (1982, 81). After her death, there were numerous miracles reported in connection with relics (mortal remains of Saint Marguerite or objects that touched her body), such as curing a sore throat, pain relief, and surviving a deadly fall (Glendelet 1977, 89–91). She herself reports intense, spiritual experiences. At the age of twenty, she was so “strongly moved” from the beauty of a statue of Mary that she gave herself “to the service of God” (1976, 141; 163). Then in her early

thirties while discerning whether to move to Ville-Marie and when she was fully awake, she saw “the Blessed Virgin [Mary]” who said “Go, I will not abandon you,” which gave her the “confidence for the voyage” (1976, 143). Finally, she reportedly felt the presence Saint Francis of Assisi in a dream who was accompanied by an angel and unknown bald man; the next day she met the bald man from her dream, who invited her to go to Montreal (Glandelet 1994, 49). These legendary tales relate that she inspired stories of her feats of courage and protectiveness.

Motivational with an Enduring Legacy

While living in France, Saint Marguerite formed a small community of women who lived together and taught the young women of Troyes. After moving to Ville-Marie, she recruited women from France to move to the New World to teach, effectively beginning the mission of the congregation in 1658. She received legal status for the congregation from the King Louis XIV of France in 1667 and negotiated “the rule” for ecclesiastical status with Bishop Saint-Vallier (bishop of Quebec) in 1698 (Simpson 2005, 37; 198). In the 1681 census, there were 19 sisters in the congregation, and by 1698 the number of sisters increased to approximately 33 sisters (Burton 1964, 138; Simpson 2005, 198). In addition to establishing a congregation, she inspired the broader community of Ville Marie. Shortly after her death, Glendelet wrote “The fact is that everyone speaks of our deceased Mother as a saint” (1977, 91). Referring to her title as “mother of the colony,” historian Dominique Deslandres explains Saint Marguerite “was lionized as a ‘mother’ of Ville-Marie” (2003, 134), evoking a fierce protectiveness and mutual care for the people of the colony.

Above all, Saint Marguerite was an educator. Deslandres explains that Saint Marguerite “explored new ways of educating young girls in a Christian way,” she welcomed and trained orphans who were sent from France (*les filles du roy*) to start families, and she offered retreats and spiritual guidance (2003, 131; 134; 142). The young girls were educated in “the science of religion and the first principles of humanities” as well as domestic skills needed for a colony far from France such as learning spinning weaving, knitting, sowing, and dressmaking, (Burton 1964; Poissant 1982, 37, 81). The congregation “conducted the schools which were attended by girls of all classes, and from both of the colony’s races,” and were so successful that for a period in time, women’s literacy rates were higher than men’s (Noel 1993, 74). Her ecological influence endured into the next century as army officer Louis Franquet described “These nuns can be found all along the river, in the seigneuries where they have been attracted in order to educate the young girls,” extending beyond Montreal into the country (Noel 1993, 75). Finally, Saint Marguerite encouraged sisters in leadership to be “torch-bearers,” invoking imagery of enlightenment and illumination

(1976, 113). Saint Marguerite had both the desire and the ability to instruct, motivate, and inspire.

Countercultural Adherence to Nature

Saint Marguerite made history for being the first female Canadian saint and for founding the first uncloistered congregation for women in North America. Louis Tronson, a Sulpician superior in Paris who corresponded with Saint Marguerite, describes her as a *visionary* (Simpson 2005, 8). In her lifetime, her congregation included indigenous women, French women, and North American-born women of French and English descent (Simpson 2005, 192). This includes Lydia Longley and Mary Sayward, two Puritan girls who were abducted from their New England homes, ransomed in New France, converted to Catholicism, and became the first “American nuns” (referring to what would become the United States) by entering the congregation (McCarthy 1958).

Jan Noel explains, “In her own day, she was an oddity...she was a populist who resisted class distinctions” (2013). Saint Marguerite welcomed women of any origin into her congregation, including women who could not afford to pay the dowry to enter cloistered communities. She said that the congregation could be “a refuge for those girls who had all the qualities but who could not become religious for lack of money” (1976, 167). Therefore, her congregation, “departed from the norms of her time” by sending sisters on missions to teach outside the walls of a convent as “wanderers” and by welcoming the poor (Bourgeoys 1976; Simpson 1997, 50, 49). She did not believe in hierarchies within the congregation. She stated, “All the sisters must be equal...the superior could be the cook and the cook, superior if they are capable of it” (1976, 171). Saint Marguerite was radical.

Modeling her congregation after Mary, the *vie voyager*, Deslandres explains that the example of the Virgin Mary as a traveler and teacher allowed Saint Marguerite to feel “entitled to refuse cloistering and to share the fruits of evangelization equally with men” (2003, 137). Saint Marguerite negotiated with the Bishop of Quebec for years, successfully fighting against being subsumed with the Ursuline sisters, cloistered, or forced to vow obedience to the bishop (Simpson 2005, 196). She wanted her sisters to be on mission *in the world*, not behind cloister walls.

CONCLUSION

So can we add Saint Marguerite Bourgeoys to the list of ecological saints? Her writings and accounts of her life demonstrate her ecological worldview, including a number of alignments with the six indicators of an ecological saint. Perhaps her most verdant traits are that she calls *God* the *Gardener*, her writings are abundant with lessons from the natural world,

and the mission of her congregation is founded in the creation story. The only contradiction to her witness as an ecological saint is the lack of biographers who identify her verdancy, but a dearth of data does not discredit her ecologicalness. Rather it is reflective of the times that she and her biographers lived in. Thus, the application of a green gaze of the life and writings of Saint Marguerite Bourgeoys reveals that she is an ecological witness for her intimate, interdependent relationship with the environment, frequent immersion in the natural world, awareness of divinity in nature, mythical qualities, motivational and enduring legacy, and countercultural inclusiveness.

The ecological saints are role models to emulate, for those seeking an awakened state, to realize that all nature reflects divinity and is intrinsically dignified. To discover who might be our environmental witnesses, six indicators were developed from the beliefs, characteristics, and actions of people perceived as ecological saints. Rather than promoting a particular way of being, the indicators reflect how others have been. Though the word *saint* connotes particular religions, the indicators can be broadly applied to consider *ecological witnesses* across religions or for our modern era. This article is offered as a starting point, a dialogue on what it means to be an ecological saint, and a seed to reconsider beloved saints by adopting a green gaze, with the hope of inspiring ecological action.

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