

# Wangari Maathai Responds to *Laudato Si'*: An Ecofeminist Dialogue with Pope Francis

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## ABSTRACT

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This article places Wangari Maathai of Kenya who founded the Green Belt Movement and received the Nobel Peace Prize in 2004, in dialogue with Pope Francis, author of *Laudato Si'*, his encyclical on ecology. It situates her ecological work within the broader framework of ecofeminism, especially that of African ecofeminism. While there is much in *Laudato Si'* that Maathai would applaud and support, I argue that she would be very disappointed that women are (with two exceptions) absent from *Laudato Si'* which ignores the contributions of ecofeminism.

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Wangari Maathai (1940-2011), the Kenyan founder of the Green Belt Movement and winner of the Nobel Peace Prize in 2004, died four years before Pope Francis issued his encyclical *Laudato Si'*: “On Care for Our Common Home” in 2015. This article will first discuss Maathai’s life and commitment to ecological justice through the Green Belt Movement which she founded. Maathai’s pioneering ecological work is a congenial companion to ecofeminist insights, especially those of African women. Her ecological perspectives and spirituality will be placed in dialogue with several key themes of *Laudato Si'*. These are the descriptions of the ecological damage which our planet is experiencing, the four core values of the Green Belt Movement which resonate with the Pope’s analysis of “ecological integrity”, and the need for change which *Laudato Si'* names as ecological conversion. How might this African woman, who was a Catholic, have responded to the Pope’s understanding of ecology? How does the thinking of these two persons converge and how does it diverge? The article will then critique the lack of gender analysis and ecofeminist thinking in the document. Maathai died in 2011, two years before Pope Francis became pope. They never met but, if they had, we can imagine they would have had a fascinating conversation on ecological matters, and Maathai would have explained to Pope Francis why the omissions in *Laudato Si'* are so disappointing and so significant.