**THIRD PLACE**

**Let Nature be the Grand Architect of the Future**

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Conflict can often feel like it permeates the world. It is no coincidence that much of the news and media we are presented with consists of wide-scale violence; for instance the ever-present war in Ukraine, or conflicts of a more ecological nature, with the environmental protesters in Latin America facing resistance from both governmental authorities and the police.

Given this pervasive nature of conflict, you may wonder, is peace-building practical?

One individual sought to answer this and was very outspoken about her views. Wangari Maathai, born 1st April 1940, had been sheltered from conflict at an early age due to being in school, but her mother had moved to emergency housing, due to the brutal Mau Mau rebellion fought between the British colonizers and Kenyan rebels, largely consisting of her ethnic group, the Kikuyu people.

Continuing with her education, she was a part of the Kennedy Airlift. 300 Kenyans, including herself, were chosen to study at universities and colleges in the US, from 1959 to 1963. It was here where she first experienced environmental protests, where activists campaigned to reduce air pollution in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

From the beginning of her professional career, she advocated for human rights to be upheld and respected. She fought for the women of her workplace to have equal benefits, with many of her demands being met. Furthermore, it was her work with Kenyan women planting trees that led to the formation of the Green Belt Movement. Rural women had issues with accessing vital resources like water or firewood and had no political power to change policies due to a deeply oppressive and patriarchal government. Even through a lack of funding, Maathai's persistence, and commitment to the organisation saw it to a UN conference, which massively expanded its scope. Today, they tackle problems that affect Kenya as a whole, through campaigns such as the Climate Change Program, which empowers rural communities to combat climate change, and educate people country wide on the importance of local communities in dealing with climate change.

Throughout her life, Maathai showed a keen understanding of the link between the state of the environment and the security of a country, especially in developing countries like Kenya. Countries fraught with conflict are less able to deal with the adverse effects of climate change. This leads to even greater instability, and, more importantly, greater suffering for the people living in affected countries. Moreover, environmental issues can also indirectly exacerbate conflict. For example, droughts can lower crop yields and cause livestock deaths, reducing food security, and driving people to crime to support themselves. In her work, we can gleam the importance of ecological preservation in building a good foundation for peace building to take place. A good indicator of a just world is one where we live in harmony with the environment.

Christianity and the environment are intrinsically linked also. In Genesis 1, humans are called to be stewards of the earth, in being given dominion over all creatures, and therefore have the responsibility to care for the environment and the animals that inhabit it. The beauty of natural world is symbolic of God's love for us, as all His creation was deemed "good." Genesis 7 details the famous Noah's Ark story, remembered for the rainbow God made after the flood, a natural phenomenon that represents God's protection of humanity. Throughout the Bible, Nature is regarded as part of God's creation, and is associated with peace and security.

Pope Francis emphasises the importance of caring for the environment, while also discussing how our actions have a rippling effect on the world around us, and especially on poorer countries.

Laudato Si was his encyclical for 2016. Its title is a direct quote from St. Francis of Assisi's "Canticle of the creatures" which illustrates how inseparable humanity is with nature. St. Francis constant use of familial nouns to refer to nature (e.g., "Sister Moon) demonstrates the intimate connection we have with nature and may suggest that our relationship with nature mirrors our relationship with each other. On the other hand, Pope Francis looks at our disconnect with nature, and our incessant need to control and subdue it. He posits that our ways of thinking are deeply flawed, in our disregard for sustainability, and that these issues cannot be solved purely by the advancement of science and technology. In addition, he presents the social and environmental problems the world faces as one complex issue, and therefore requires solutions that considers these both.

So where does that leave us? Are we doomed to constantly repair the damage caused by conflict? Progress may be gradual, but it can have lasting impacts. Through dialogue and action, we can mitigate the harm inflicted and tilt the world towards a better future. We must also remain cognizant of our effect on the planet in which we inhabit and rely on. Maathai's Green Belt Movement is a pertinent example of this idea. What started as a grassroots movement to tackle the agricultural struggles rural Kenyan women faced, has borne fruit far beyond her home country, and still goes on to influence global issues.

For World Day of Peace 2023, Pope Francis returned to a common theme of interconnectedness, reflecting on the renewed need for fraternity. To combat conflict, we must be united by an even greater desire for peace. We must keep our ears open for the cries of the earth - from flora, fauna, and friend alike.