

April 2006

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Recommended Citation

Glancy, Jennifer A. (2006) "Book Reviews: Blessed Among All Women: Women, Saints, Prophets, and Witnesses for Our Time, Robert Ellsberg, Crossroads," *Conversations on Jesuit Higher Education*: Vol. 29, Article 27.
Available at: <http://epublications.marquette.edu/conversations/vol29/iss1/27>

Book Review

Robert Ellsberg, *Blessed Among All Women: Women Saints, Prophets, and Witnesses for Our Time.*

Crossroad, 316 pp., \$19.95

By Jennifer A. Glancy

One of the women Robert Ellsberg celebrates in *Blessed among All Women: Women Saints, Prophets, and Witnesses for Our Time*, is Dorothy Day, the influential founder of the Catholic Worker movement. Day was often called a saint in her own lifetime, an epithet she rejected as a form of dismissal. Ellsberg quotes Day: "When they call you a saint, it means basically that you're not to be taken seriously."

Ellsberg's challenge in this volume of miniature hagiographies is to tell the stories of women from Mary Magdalene to Maura Clarke, from Teresa of Avila to Simone Weil, without taming them. Although Ellsberg does not restrict his list to canonized saints, his selection emphasizes women from the Catholic tradition. This is a devotional work. It is not an academic or theoretical work. However, by casting these women's stories as saints' lives, Ellsberg invites us to think richly about the vocation of being human, the quality of holiness, and whether being a woman makes a difference.

The genre of saints' lives may, inevitably, domesticate the challenging lives inscribed therein, at least for adult readers whose imaginations were shaped by brightly colored depictions of St. Lucy with her eyes on a platter. Ellsberg strives to reverse these expectations. His list is heavy on rebels and trouble-makers. In his introduction, he notes that many of these women were excommunicated and their movements suppressed. He reminds the reader that saints like Clare of Assisi were, in their lifetimes, not icons of convention but iconoclasts.

In my vivid, even lurid, childhood memories of reading saints' lives, an alarming number of women achieved sainthood through heroic preservation of virginity. St. Maria Goretti was one such woman, or rather, girl. An Italian child, she was only eleven when she resisted a rapist who killed her in the course of her struggle. It took a day for her to die of her wounds. Before her death, she forgave her rapist. Ellsberg includes Goretti precisely to raise the question of what, if anything, she should be remembered for. Noting that Goretti was held up as an exemplar for generations of Catholic girls, Ellsberg asks: "If Maria Goretti had survived her rape and then expressed the same astonishing charity towards her assailant, would she have been similarly honored by her family and her church?"

An important question. I wish that Ellsberg had gone further in this volume in exploring the relationship between sexual codes and concepts of holiness. Maria Goretti's story might also help us think, for example, about the all-too-common sexual exploitation of children, especially within the home (Goretti's 18-year old attacker lived with her family). How does childhood sexual abuse affect a woman's capacity to perceive herself as holy? Is it possible to reclaim Goretti's story, not as the narrative of a female best-known for preserving her virginity but as the narrative of a female who fought to control what happened to her body? Parallel questions arise with a number of other entries.

In some cases Ellsberg passes in silence over problematic aspects of

women's legacies. In telling the story of Monica, the mother of Saint Augustine, for example, he does not mention her advice to other women to tolerate their husbands' physical abuse, advice that has been pastorally handed on to many women over the centuries.

In other cases his omissions render controversial figures bland. After summarizing the canonical resurrection accounts, he writes, "Nothing else is known of Mary Magdalene." He notes that she is not mentioned either in the letters of Paul or the Acts of the Apostles. She is, however, mentioned in Gnostic literature, where she appears as a rival with Peter for authority within the church. The truly sensational story about Mary Magdalene is not the one popularized in *The DaVinci Code*. Rather, it's the story of her influence in the first generations of the church, a story Ellsberg sells short. One wishes to become better acquainted with these women. Ellsberg typically provides one or two bibliographic suggestions for each entry. Beyond bibliography, however, these women would make terrific companions. The volume encourages us to open ourselves to the communion of saints, the cloud of witnesses, as companions, companions both to mourn with us and to challenge us. ■

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