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Book Reviews: Blessed Among All Women: Women, Saints, Prophets, and Witnesses for Our Time, Robert Ellsberg, Crossroads

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By Jennifer A. Glancy

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?”

A more 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 14-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 beast 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 invisible. 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 one of the popularized in The Da Vinci 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 both to mourn with us and to challenge us.

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