

Robert Ellsberg
**Blessed Among all Women,
Women saints, prophets and
witnesses for our time**
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"A Woman Faced with Two Alternatives. She Saw and Chose the Third."
Many of the women gathered in this book could share that motto of Angela Merici, founder of the Ursuline order.

Robert Ellsberg tells us that while he has drawn on the list of official saints, he has reached much wider, recalling the lives of women whose way of faithfulness speaks to the needs of our time. Some might meet the requirements for canonization but others certainly do not: they are not Roman Catholics and some are not even Christians.

Thinking, at first, that I could review this book simply by exploring a few contrasting stories, I found myself compelled to read every one. As Wendy Beckett remarks: "This book ... in honouring women, honours humanity", and I found myself, like Beckett, often moved to tears by these tales of courage and daring compassion.

Included here are women from every age: from the centuries of the Hebrew scriptures; the years of the emerging Christian community of the first centuries, to women who died just a few years ago. They come from all lands: European countries, the USA, Central and South America, Russia and Japan. Among them are a photographer, a poet, a mother, a murderer, a rag picker and a millionaire. We meet political activists, social workers, a faithful prostitute, martyrs for civil rights, feminists, a holocaust witness, abolitionists and puritan prophets. Many emerge from long obscurity as pioneers of new schools of spirituality and alternative models of discipleship.

Traditional accounts of women saints - written almost exclusively by men - often stress feminine virtues" such as purity, humble service, obedience and patient endurance. But, as Ellsberg writes in his Introduction: "Seldom have women been recognized for questioning authority; for defying restrictive codes and models of behaviour; for audacity and wit in surmounting obstacles." Even the labels given to women saints reveal a narrow range within which their sanctity is expected to operate: "virgins", "founders of religious communities"; "virgin-martyrs"; "widows" and "matrons". These designations have revealed nothing of the gifts of these women as theologians, prophets, healers and visionaries, nor their struggle in contending with male authorities who were all too ready to condemn their desires as contrary to the will of God.

Ellsberg has grouped his stories according to the Beatitudes whose blessings, he reminds us, are not bestowed upon abstract qualities, but upon the people who embody them. By standing in the presence of such gutsy, passionate

women, one catches a renewed sense of what it means to be a human being.
This is a book to convict, challenge and inspire.

Catherine Joy CSF