

*Friends of God and Prophets*, by Elizabeth A. Johnson

reviewed by [Monika K. Hellwig](#) in the [January 20, 1999](#) issue

By Elizabeth A. Johnson, *Friends of God and Prophets*. (Continuum, 324 pp.)

Elizabeth Johnson takes her title from the apocryphal *Wisdom of Solomon*, 7:27, which states that from generation to generation divine wisdom passes into holy souls and fashions them into friends of God and prophets. Johnson, a well-known feminist theologian, considers the Catholic doctrine of the communion of saints from a feminist perspective, and discovers that, though this doctrine has played a large role in liturgy, creedal affirmations, devotional practices and Christian art, it has received little theological attention. She finds this an advantage, since it enables her to analyze the practice of saint-making and saint-reverencing without having to wrestle with entrenched theological interpretations.

Johnson observes that most canonized saints are men, many of them from privileged social classes, and that few among the relatively small number of women saints were married. Though this will not surprise most people, Johnson sets it out through painstaking head counts. More surprising is the omission from liturgical reading of biblical stories that portray women as strong and independent. Johnson also demonstrates the pattern of distortion in the customary narratives of the lives of women saints, whose creative initiatives are constantly presented as acts of obedience to authority.

Johnson's critique of what she calls "the system of sainthood" looks beyond individual women saints into the underlying concept. She examines the hierarchical implications of the way the relationship between the living and the dead is understood. Building on prior efforts by feminist theologians to retrieve a usable past from the Bible itself by reinterpreting the significance of neglected female figures, Johnson engages in a dialogue with what remains a living tradition in the Roman Catholic Church and some other churches. She revisits this tradition from a perspective that assumes authentic human relationships are not intrinsically and inevitably hierarchical or patriarchal. She embarks on a historical quest, beginning with Hebrew prehistory, to trace concepts of Christian life and holiness throughout the development of the church.

Johnson finds two patterns emerging, beginning with the stories of the early Christian martyrs. One emphasizes the companionship of friends in Christ, some of whom have died but all of whom are on the same quest and in the same relationship with God and Jesus. The other sees the martyrs as patrons and the living as petitioners who seek their intercession and protection. Johnson traces these patterns through the church's institutionalizing of saints, especially through the formal processes of canonization under the authority of the hierarchy. She recounts the responses of the 16th-century reformers, both Protestant and Catholic, and brings the subject up to date by looking at the brief mention the communion of saints receives in the documents of Vatican II and in the Catholic commentary on those documents.

This historical background prepares the way for a theological inquiry. Johnson sets out the significance of remembering, especially as it is understood in feminist thought. She explores the notion of dangerous or subversive memories in various liberation theologies and deals with the implications of 20th-century theologies of death and hope. In this context, Johnson proposes ways of celebrating the communion of saints as a fruitful, generative relational symbol--a symbol that honors creative fidelity in ordinary life, extends the range of models and relationships, and lets "the Symbol sing again" in people's experience.

The book is something of a tour de force, challenging the church to let its "paradigmatic figures" be real, individual, creative and varied. It explores the implications this challenge has for our understanding of our own lives and times. There is little that is purely negative in the book. Johnson goes beyond complaining about the dearth and distortion of women saints; she studies the underlying implications, which go beyond gender. Though this is, of course, the purpose of all serious feminist theology, it is not always achieved.

Johnson confirms and enhances the authentic spirituality in this doctrine so deeply rooted in Catholic experience and sensitivities, and discreetly prunes away all that is unhelpful to the spiritual quest. Her book should be read slowly, thoughtfully and prayerfully by Christians of all denominations, for it has much to say about belonging to the communion of *all* the saints.