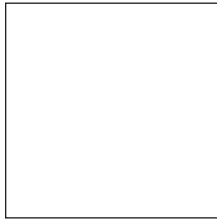


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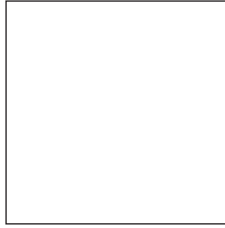
“Community on Earth as in
Heaven: A Holy People and
a Sacred Earth Together”

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Community on Earth as in Heaven: A Holy People and a Sacred Earth Together

Elizabeth A. Johnson

What is going on when a young mom or dad sets up a Christmas crib in their home and explains the different figures to their small child? What is going on when a young man or woman spends the first year after college graduation working as a volunteer in solidarity with poor people on a Caribbean island nation? What is going on when a group of women struggling for their own human dignity pray a litany of remembrance that includes Hagar, Mary Magdalene, Hildegard of Bingen, and Dorothy Day? What is going on when Francis of Assisi addresses all of earth's creatures as sisters and brothers, praising God in a canticle for Brother Sun and Sister Moon, for Brothers Wind and Fire, and Sisters Water and Earth?

In every instance, the belief known as the communion of saints is being put into action.¹ This rich religious symbol, affirmed in the Apostles' Creed and celebrated on All Saints' Day (November 1), enfolds all the living and the dead into a great community, across the generations and across the wide world, under the outstretched wings of the Spirit of God. Although it is filled with potential for hope and practical action, this doctrine has gone into a rather deep sleep in current teaching, preaching, and the religious imagination of large numbers of people in Western secular culture, especially among the young. But a symbol so pneumatological, so relational, so inclusive and egalitarian, so respectful of persons who are defeated and praising of those who succeed against all odds, so hope-filled and so practical, has the potential to empower all who struggle for the good in the name of God. In a particular way it can empower women in the struggle for recognition of their equal human dignity and participation in church and society. And so, in this lecture, I propose to wake up this sleeping giant and allow it to play among us once again. The awakening will occur in three steps. First, we will consider the ancient meaning of the communion of saints as the circle of God-seeking people who are alive today. Next, we will explore how this living group expands its horizons to include community with those who have died, focusing in particular on how the connection between the living and the dead can empower women in the struggle for their own freedom and dignity. Finally, we will note how this community of holy ones broadens even further to include the natural world. A core vision written in the Book of Wisdom guides our search for understanding:

Although she is but one, she can do all things,
and while remaining in herself, she renews all things;
in every generation she passes into holy souls
and makes them friends of God, and prophets. (Wis 7:27)

The Living Community Today: Saints All and Each

In the first place, the communion of saints refers to all living persons who seek the truth and try to live in a loving way. While the term itself was coined by Christians to describe their own experience of grace, God's blessings cannot be limited to the church. Within human cultures everywhere, God's Holy Spirit calls persons to seek truth and live in love and justice with others, so that "friends of God and prophets" can be found in every tongue and nation, even among religion's cultured despisers.

This global framework serves to keep the symbol inclusive when we apply it specifically to the group that originated it, the Christian community. Here, it expresses a sense of blessing that arises thanks to Jesus Christ. As Paul wrote, "where sin abounded, grace did superabound" (Rom 5:20), so that "there is now no more condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (Rom 1:8). Consequently, the whole community, while composed of sinners, nevertheless is a redeemed community, a holy people of God. And by virtue of belonging to this community, every member is fundamentally holy. The holiness of baptized persons is not simply an ethical matter, something to be earned by trying to be morally perfect. Rather, it is a gift freely given by which we participate in the very life of God according to the dynamic of a covenant relationship: "You shall be holy for I am holy" (Lev 11:45).

New Testament writers drew deeply on the Jewish tradition of the holy people of God to describe their own community, meanwhile settling on a new term to express it: "the saints." For example, Paul writes, "To all God's beloved in Rome, who are called to be saints" (Rom 1:7); "To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi" (Phil 1:1); "To the church of God that is in Corinth, to all of you who are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints" (1 Cor 1:2); "All the saints greet you" (2 Cor 13:13). Over 60 times in the New Testament the word "saints" expresses the truth that all together and without discrimination, Christians gathered here or gathered there are a communion of holy people. This point is highlighted by the Pentecost story. Artistic works usually depict only 13 people present when the Holy Spirit descended, namely, the 12 male apostles with Mary in their midst. But Luke tells us in Acts that the group numbered about 120 people, and included Jesus' women disciples along with some of his family members. As Luke describes the event: "tongues as of fire rested on each of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability" (Acts 2:3-4). Each of them, all of them: here we see the nucleus of the church, every single member of the community being filled with the Spirit of God. The whole community receives the Spirit for the sake of the needy world.

Too often theology has squeezed this inclusive meaning of the communion of saints dry, eliminating most baptized persons from sainthood in favor of a small group of elite office-holders or canonized saints. But this woefully shortchanges the gift of God, whose gracious mercy through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ calls, blesses, and sends forth all the living people who form the beloved community.

Vatican II made a remarkable contribution to this theology with its teaching on “the call of the whole church to holiness.” Through baptism persons are put right with God in Christ; receiving the Spirit, they become sharers in the divine nature. “In this way they are really made holy.” (*Lumen Gentium* #40). This same holiness, furthermore, is essentially the same for everyone. There is not one type of holiness for lay persons and another for those in religious life or ordained ministry. There is not one kind of indwelling of the Spirit for office-holders in the church and another for unnoticed, faithful members. Rather, “in the various types and duties of life, *one and the same holiness* is cultivated by all who are moved by the Spirit of God.” (*LG* #41). In other words, the church is not divided into saints and non-saints. Vivified by grace, every woman, man, and child, in whatever diverse circumstances and of whatever race, class, ethnicity, sexual persuasion, or any other marker that both identifies and divides human beings, participates in God’s holy life. The vocation to be friends of God, and prophets, shapes the life of everyone in the community. Hello, saints!

If this be the case, then the symbol of the communion of saints emerges with an unexpected prophetic edge. It challenges those charged with pastoral leadership in the church, first of all, to bend every effort toward highlighting the extraordinary status of lay women and men, blossoming since Vatican II but still in need of nurturing. People may be overheard saying “I’m no saint,” but in truth they are created in the image of God, graced by Christ, called and gifted in the Spirit. In other words, the *holiness of ordinary persons in the midst of ordinary time* needs to be ever more strongly taught and celebrated if people are not to be robbed of their heritage and true identity. A second challenge arises from this realization that the whole community enjoys a transforming relationship with the triune God in an equal manner. Then social relationships and structures within the community of disciples that do not embody this truth appear deeply inadequate and in need of transforming grace. In other words, spiritual equality presses the question of social and political equality to the fore.

Forming a community of companions in grace around the globe today, living persons seek the face of God, cling to God’s gracious mercy in the face of suffering and sin, and make their own contribution to the

heritage of faith and love in the world. Then they pass through the shattering of death into the life-giving hands of God, to be followed by the fresh young faces of a new generation of all saints.

Cloud of Witnesses Through Time

Christians cling to the hope that not even death “will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus” (Rom 8:39). Hence, early on they concluded that the communion of saints is not restricted to persons who live and breathe at the present moment but also includes those who have died. Let us acknowledge at the outset that this idea presents many difficulties to contemporary minds and hearts. We are aware that death truly ends life as we know it, and no one knows what happens next. No empirical investigation can lift the veil that shrouds this unknown future. Even the Bible knows this agnosticism, writing that “eye has not seen nor ear heard” what things God has in store (1 Cor 2:9), and so “we hope for what we do not see” (Rom 8:25). Compounding our dilemma are scientific investigations into the mind-brain connection and the flow of matter through all life-systems which cast doubt on personal survival after death. Philosophy too understands the person as embodied spirit-in-the-world rather than a dualism of body and soul that can be split up with the soul continuing to exist. In addition, theology is acutely aware that language about what happens after death is metaphorical, so that the classical constructs of heaven, hell, and purgatory are not real “places” but need to be interpreted as evocative symbols.

Due to such difficulties, people in Western secular culture tend to sense as a rule that those who have died have truly disappeared from this world. They are no longer accessible to the living in any direct fashion, as was possible to imagine in a previous age. If this be the case with people we know, how much more does it pertain to those who have died long ago, the whole traditional roster of saints. To retrieve this aspect of the communion of saints, i.e., the idea that it includes the living dead and does so in a liberating and empowering way, four related issues need to be addressed: the character of God who desires all to live; the companionship model of memory and hope; the role of paradigmatic figures; and the work of feminist scholarship that retrieves the memory of women and so contributes to the fullness of the symbol in our day.

The Character of God. While writing a recent book on the communion of saints, I wrestled with the chapters on death in a fierce way. I tried to make different philosophical systems work to explain and assure personal life after death. But none of them would go the distance. And so I humbly offer you the conclusion I have come to as a theological opinion: Since the darkness of death is unconquerable, the only way possible

to resolve the issue of the fate of the dead is not with rational argument but with an existential act—radical faith in God.

For the Christian community, the bedrock of this faith is the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. This cruel death was a real death; it violently tore apart his whole life, no piece of him slipping through its mesh. In face of this destruction, the Easter message proclaims that the crucified one dies not into nothingness but into the absolute mystery of the glory of God. Starting with Mary Magdalene, the disciples announce *Vivit - he lives*: the godforsaken one lives forever with God as pledge of the future of all the dead. While this is utterly unimaginable and cannot be reduced to a kind of physiological miracle, it nevertheless affirms that Jesus in his whole person and in all dimensions of his historical existence has entered into a new and different brilliance of life in the embrace of God.

There is a very precise correlation between the Spirit of God who gives life to the dead and the action of the same Creator Spirit who brings the world into being. In both cases one begins with virtually nothing: no world, no future for a dead person. Then the vivifying breath of the Spirit moves over the void. “In the beginning,” this creates the world; in the moment of death, this carries persons through perishing into new life. The Nicene Creed traces this logic, starting with belief in God who makes heaven and earth, and ending with belief in the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come. Thus, hope in eternal life for oneself and others is not some curiosity tacked on as an appendage to faith, but is faith itself brought to its radical depth. It is faith in the living God that does not stop halfway but follows the road consistently to the end, trusting that the God of the beginning is also the God of the end, who faithfully utters the same word in each case: let there be life. There is, then, reason to hope that persons are not lost in death but are enfolded into the mystery of the gracious being of God which to us is darkness but to them is the fulfillment of their lives in the sphere of the Spirit. All the biblical images of light, banquet, harvest, rest, singing, homecoming, reunion, tears wiped away, seeing face to face, and knowing as we are known, point to a deep, living communion in God’s own life. The loving, faithful character of God is the foundation for including the dead in the communion of saints. They die not into nothingness but “into the embrace of God.”

If we ask after these persons in themselves, seeking where they are to be found, the only possible answer, since they do not belong to the empirical world around us, is that they abide in God. If we seek to relate to these persons in themselves, we realize that there can be no direct, sensible communication such as was possible when they were alive in time. Even if we try to summon them and transpose them into our concrete world, something that is attempted in spiritualist seances or manipulative

pieties, they only appear as we are, earth-bound, and not as they are, embraced in the light of absolute mystery. But they have passed from our circle into the hidden life of God, and so ultimately they are found in our experience where God is. In Karl Rahner's careful words, "We meet the living dead, even when they are those loved by us, in faith, hope, and love, that is, when we open our hearts to the silent calm of God's own self, in which they live; not by calling them back to where we are, but by descending into the silent eternity of our own hearts, and through faith in the risen Lord, creating in time the eternity which they have brought forth forever."² In other words, we meet them not by reducing their reality to our own imaginative size but by going forth to where they dwell in the mystery of the living God as the beginning of the new heaven and the new earth. In the end, then, there is God or there is nothing.

Companionship in Memory and Hope. The company of saints in heaven beggars description. While a few are remembered by name, millions upon anonymous millions of others are also included—people who made some personal contribution to the amount of goodness there is in the world. Among these saints are also those untimely dead, killed in god-forsaken incidents of terror, war, and mass death. Having drunk so deeply of the cup of crucifixion, they call forth special mention in anguish and lament. Among these saints are numbered also some whom we know personally. Their number increases as we get older: grandparents, mother and father, sisters and brothers, beloved spouses and life partners, children, teachers, fellow students, patients, clients, friends and colleagues, relatives and neighbors, spiritual guides and religious leaders. Their lives, complete with fault and favor, have reached journey's end. Gone from us, they have arrived home in unimaginable life within the embrace of God. To say of all these people that they form with us the company of the redeemed is to give grief a direction, affirming that in the end God graciously has the last word, which is life. In instances where persons have wrought real and lasting damage by their actions, faith holds out the possibility that at their deepest core they did not concur in diabolical evil, or if they did, that they have repented. The church's prayer is that God will be more merciful toward them than they have been to others. On their behalf, at least we may hope.

When we alive today seek to relate to this great multitude that has gone before us, two possibilities lie open. In one, which can be called the patronage model, we relate to the saints as clients to powerful patrons. According to this pattern, God is imagined to exist like a king ruling in splendor, with hosts of courtiers ranked in descending order of importance. Being far from the distant throne, we little people need saints as intercessors who will take on our case and obtain spiritual and material

favors that would otherwise not be forthcoming. With the saints we have friends in high places, so to speak. That is put rather baldly but it is not inaccurate. This patron-client relationship is not found in the New Testament nor in the early Christian centuries, but developed under the influence of the civil patronage system in the late Roman empire once the church had received official recognition. It is a form of relationship that is rapidly waning, not least because its patriarchal structure of power and powerlessness so misreads the truth of God's merciful presence in Christ to everyone.

A more ancient pattern of relationship can be discerned in biblical and early Christian texts. Modeled on companionship rather than patronage, it names those who have died as friends and fellow travelers in the one Spirit-filled community. Rather than the main action being prayers of petition from a client to a patron, this pattern of relationship thanks God for the lives of those who have gone before us and remembers them in such a way as to awaken hope in the midst of current struggles. This is not to say that saints are no longer called upon to "pray for us"; but such petitionary prayer is secondary and is set within a broad, collegial context of mutual sharing in God's mercy. Several examples can awaken our religious imagination of how this model works.

In the New Testament letter to the "Hebrews" there is an extraordinary roll call of Jewish ancestors, each of whom responded with faith to the challenge of their lives: Abel, Noah, Abraham, Sarah, the parents of Moses, Rahab, David, along with myriads of others who both acted and suffered in the name of God. The dramatic highpoint is reached when the author writes: "Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith ..." (Heb 12:1-2). The image here is of a stadium packed with a crowd, each of whom had once run the race, now cheering for those on the tarmac. Here the faithful dead are not proposed as the objects of a cult nor even as exemplars to be imitated, but as a throng of faithful people whose journey we continue to share. Their courage and ultimate victory awaken hope that we too might win the race. It is a matter of being inspired by the whole lot of them, this cloud of witnesses to the living God.

In the age of the martyrs, this mutual, collegial relationship between the living and the dead came to new expression as the community drew strength from those who had witnessed to the gospel with their very lives. One of Augustine's sermons on the feast of the young women martyrs Perpetua and Felicity captures this companionship model well. Note the

mutuality: “Let it not seem a small thing to us that we are members of the same body as these. ... We marvel at them, they have compassion on us. We rejoice for them, they pray for us. ... Yet do we all serve one Lord, follow one teacher, attend one king. We are all joined to one head, journey to the same Jerusalem, follow after the one love, embrace the same unity.”³

Let us stay with Augustine for a minute, for in preaching on the feasts of the martyrs over many years he provides an extended vocabulary for this partnership between the living and the dead. God is already at work among you, he points out to his congregation, cultivating you like an orchard, producing buds, strengthening your branches, clothing you with leaves and loading you with fruit. Central to this spiritual growth is the eucharist, whose consecrated elements of bread and wine have extraordinary power: “If you receive them well, you are yourselves what you receive” (S. 227). In this context—and only in this context of the holiness of the living community as the body of Christ—the saints in heaven can be received as a gift. They are like that gospel jar of ointment whose fragrance fills our whole house; celebrating their festivals gives us “lessons of encouragement” (S. 273). If you think you can’t do what they did, just remember they lived by the grace of God, and “the fountain is still flowing, it hasn’t dried up” (S. 315). Indeed, we have it a little easier, thanks to them: “by passing along the narrow road they widened it ... they made our path smoother” (S. 306c). People who lived before us had no idea that one day there would be a community in Carthage, a church of the future praising God: “they weren’t yet able to see it; yet they were already constructing it out of their own lives” (S. 306c). Their adventure of faith opened a way for us, and now we go ahead of others in an ongoing river of companions seeking God. And when our own journey grows hard, we can draw strength from the memory of our forebears’ sufferings and victories: “How can the way be rough when it has been smoothed by the feet of so many walking ahead of us?” (S. 306). In these words, one gets a strong sense of connectedness that is brought about by the act of remembrance. In this companionship model, the communion of saints is practiced less as a cult of the saints and more as a disciplined way of remembering that connects us together and empowers and encourages us in our own struggles for justice, peace, wholeness of life.

The communion of saints forges intergenerational bonds across time that sustain faith in new times and places. Surrounded by the cloud of witnesses, connected in memory and hope, we learn their lessons of encouragement and cherish in very different circumstances what they cared enough to live and die for. In recent times Vatican II underscored

this original Christian intuition of a community of the friends of God and prophets, living and dead, using the explicit language of companionship: “Just as Christian communion among [living] wayfarers brings us closer to Christ, so our companionship with the saints joins us to Christ, from whom as from their fountain and head issue every grace and the life of God’s people itself” (*Lumen Gentium* 50). Rather than be bound in a patron-client pattern, the saints in heaven and on earth become partners in memory and hope. Now a related question arises, concerning which particular persons are to be publicly remembered for the encouragement of the whole church.

Paradigmatic Figures. Within the vast cloud of witnesses, particular persons have emerged again and again who witness to the gospel in splendid and striking ways. When these persons are recognized by the common spiritual intuition of the community, they become publicly significant for the lives of others. These are the persons traditionally and all too narrowly called saints. Theologically they have no essential spiritual advantage over the rest of the community who are saints in the biblical sense. But their own unique gifts intersect with the needs of a moment in history, giving them a distinctive public role among their fellow pilgrims.

For the first 12 centuries, the local church community with the approval of their bishop recognized such special persons by naming them at Mass, thus entering them onto the community’s list or “canon” of such holy people. Starting in the 12th century, however, the process of naming public saints was increasingly centralized in the papal office. Now petition had to be made to Rome, where a long process of scrutiny might or might not result in someone being declared a public saint. The results have been decidedly mixed. Gains include quelling claims that border on the fantastic, as well as overcoming the provincialism of a particular locale. But these gains are offset by the nature of the official list of saints, who have become an ever more elite group, proclaimed for their heroic virtue and their power to produce spectacular miracles (which power has a tenuous connection with real holiness); a group, furthermore, that mirrors the face of the bureaucracy that created it, being largely clerical, celibate, aristocratic, European, and male; a group created in response to large investments of time and money and thus largely excluding lay and poor persons. Numerous scholars now argue that for the good of the church, the formal canonization process should be abandoned or at least radically modified.⁴

Despite these difficulties, the importance of the role of paradigmatic saints amid the whole community remains. These women and men distill the central values of the faith into concrete form, making these values widely accessible. The uncanny integrity of their lives leavens the moral environment, luring the community ever more deeply into life lived for

God, while the direct force of their example acts as a catalyst galvanizing us to say yes, this is what we are called to be. The light of their memory encourages our creative witness, inasmuch as one fire kindles another. Indeed, they are like a Milky Way, a shining river of stars spiraling out from the center of the galaxy to light a path through the darkness back to that center, the divine mystery. Long before the juridical process was invented, local communities, through the power of the Spirit, could recognize persons who gave such beautiful witness to the gospel in uniquely different circumstances and made God's presence felt through their life of discipleship. This power has not deserted the church.

Feminist Retrieval of Women's Holiness. The position of women in the church's public memory as a result of canonization is particularly troubling. A simple head count shows that 75 percent of the persons on the roster of canonized saints are men, and 75 percent of saints' days on the liturgical calendar honor men, while only 25 percent of those so recognized are women. Does this mean that men are holier than women? Of course not. But it does highlight the fact that men have the power of naming in the church, a power exercised by marginalizing those considered to be of less importance. Least represented among women saints are married women who remained so for their lives (i.e., did not become nuns), reflecting the assessment that to be female is a handicap but to be a sexually active woman renders one almost incapable of embodying the sacred (the few exceptions are queens). As a result, the history of women's holiness has been largely erased from the collective memory of the church. If in view of the traditional group of "saints" we ask what is missing, we must answer with Adrienne Rich, "the particularity and commonality of this vast turbulence of female becoming, which is continually being erased or generalized."⁵ Even when they are remembered, the lives of exemplary women are narrated so as to emphasize the patriarchal ideal of the "good" woman; stereotypical feminine virtues such as obedience and submission, sexual purity, and acceptance of suffering overshadow the history of real women's raw struggle in the Spirit. The result is a meager feast for women's souls. Indeed, most women today do not find inspiration in the traditional lives of the saints, dismissing them as narratives of fading power.

For the communion of saints to function in a liberating way for women, deliberate attention must be turned to this public history of neglect. Their absence must be noticed, missed, criticized, and corrected. It is not just a matter of adding women to what remains a patriarchal master narrative. The challenge, rather, is to reshape the church's memory so as to reclaim an equal share in the center for women and thereby transform the community.

In our day, providentially, an amazing resurgence of scholarship raises the intriguing possibility that precisely this new conceptuality is possible. Feminist biblical and historical research, received in women's gatherings for prayer and ministry, and feminist theological reflection which prizes mutuality and unmask dualist, subordinationist patterns of thought, have developed methods of retrieving glimpses of women who, though denied power and voice, were nevertheless there, walking with God. Recovering lost memories, rectifying patriarchal distortions, reassigning value, and breaking the silences, these methods vigorously erase the erasure of women's lives in the Spirit. As a result of this renaissance in scholarship, hosts of neglected persons are brought to light, a lost heritage of holy, struggling lives that, once recovered, help women break the grip of forces dominating their lives. For diverse as situations are, parallel experiences of suffering under patriarchy link women of different generations once their stories are heard. Then connection between the generations, spirit touching spirit, sparks women's new determination to become subjects of their own history.⁶

Some examples: the story of Hagar, precious to women of color and domestic workers and challenging to women who would dominate other women, presents the Egyptian slave woman who disrupts the covenant narrative of Abraham and Sarah; she is the first person in scripture to receive the promise of a great people stemming from her, and the first to dare to name God; she is a survivor.⁷ The story of Mary Magdalene, valuable to women in ministry, describes her as a leading apostolic witness to the risen Christ rather than a repentant prostitute as she has been made to appear in the history of patriarchal interpretation.⁸ Narratives of the virgin martyrs recoup the strength Agatha, Lucy, Cecilia, Anastasia, and others, young girls put to death not because they feared sexuality but because they were so empowered by Christ that they could resist society's demands that they enter into patriarchal marriage; they resisted the right of the state to dictate the terms of their humanity.⁹ Conscious remembrance of myriads of anonymous women breaks the official silence about their existence and contributions: women in the history of Israel, women in the ministry of Jesus, women at the cross and resurrection event, women in the apostolic church, women as prophets, apostles, and leaders of house churches, women martyrs, women ascetics, nonconformist women, wives and mothers, nuns and single lay women, women mystics, women reformers, women theologians, women burning with charity for the poor and distressed, women burned at the stake, slave women, poor women, working women, women creating art and beauty, women laboring at crafts, women feeding, women healing, women of every color, women seeking equal partnership with men, women preaching, women interpret-

ing the Bible, women leading others in the ways of the spirit, peacemaking women, women loving their children, women loving their husbands, women escaping their husbands, raped and brutalized women, marginalized and silenced women, women fighting male restrictions on their lives and ministry, women resisting injustice, sexually active women, setting-out-not-knowing-where-they-are-going women, “ordinary” women of fidelity and valor—all these have been there, living their lives before God. To discover these foresters with their sufferings and defeats, their accomplishments and victories, and to recover their lives from the judgment that labels them insignificant is to break through a long and debilitating amnesia.

The power of memory shows itself precisely here, as an historically disenfranchised group, one that ultimately includes half the human race, connects with the great cloud of female witnesses who are cheering them on. Their memory is subversive, their narrative empowering, and solidarity with them in all difference encouraging in the quest for wisdom and the struggle to transform unjust, violent structures that dehumanize persons. By connecting to generations of women who have walked faithfully on this earth until now, women find a place to stand from which they can challenge the interconnected biases that continue to press down on their lives in church and society. Recognizing the play of grace in the lives of other women, women gain a more anchored appreciation of their own blessedness. Conversely, acknowledging themselves to be sacred, in the very image of God, women become empowered to cherish and celebrate the holiness of other women and to resist what disparages this sacred reality.

This experience offers a paradigm for retrieving the communion of saints not as a static doctrine but as a prophetic symbol. Rich connection to the great historical company of the past functions as a source of religious energy for struggle now and also as a pointer to a different future in view of the gospel promise, tested and witnessed to in so many lives. Feminist practice of reading women onto the list as equal partners in the company of God’s friends and prophets opens up a resource of great liberating power. It enlists the communion of saints as an ally in the struggle for women’s equal participation in church and society. Not incidentally, it also charts a path along which the whole church in this secular culture can rediscover this neglected religious symbol as a source of strength in ongoing transformation of itself and society in accord with God’s compassionate justice and care.

The Whole Community of Life

On the face of it, the communion of saints seems to be thoroughly focused on the human community, living and dead. However, there is an

intriguing ambiguity in the original Latin term *communio sanctorum* that enables the natural world to be included in a compelling manner. On the one hand, *sanctorum* may be a form of the noun *sancti*, in which case the term means ‘holy persons.’ On the other hand, *sanctorum* may just as well be a form of the noun *sancta*, in which instance the term refers to ‘holy things.’ This latter reference was clearly intended when the phrase was first used in the Eastern church, where *koinonia ton hagion* (fellowship of the holy) meant participation in sacred things, in particular the eucharistic bread and cup of salvation. Medieval theologians played with both meanings, the personal/subjective and the sacramental/objective, and in truth there is no need to choose between the two for they reinforce one another. The *communio sanctorum* is a complex, Spirit-filled community sharing in each others’ lives and in the sacraments: holy people and holy things inextricably linked.

In the light of the contemporary moral imperative to treat the ever-more damaged earth as a sacred creation with its own intrinsic rather than instrumental value, the elusive quality of the phrase’s original meaning is a happy circumstance. At its best, sacramental theology has always drawn on the connection between the natural world and the signs of bread, wine, water, oil, and sexual intercourse which, when taken into the narrative of Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection, become avenues of God’s healing grace. Now, in the time of earth’s agony, the *sancta* can be pushed to its widest meaning to include the gifts of air, water, land, and the myriad creatures that share the planet with human beings in interwoven ecosystems—the brothers and sisters of Francis of Assisi’s vision. For the universe itself is the primordial sacrament through which we participate in and communicate with divine mystery. Since the same divine Spirit who lights the fire of the saint also fuels the vitality of all creation, then “communion in the holy” includes holy people and a holy world in interrelationship. By this line of thinking, a door opens from within the symbol of the communion of saints itself to include all beings, sacred bread and wine certainly, but also the primordial sacrament, the earth itself. Once again, this symbol reveals its prophetic edge as its cosmic dimension calls forth an ecological ethic of restraint of human greed and promotion of care for the earth.

Including the natural world in the communion of the holy sets up an interesting dynamic between human hope for the dead and hope for the natural world. In an evolutionary perspective, human hope for eternal life can be interpreted to embody the hope of the universe itself. Billions of years before our appearance the cosmos was already seeded with promise, pressing toward its future with an innate impulse that blossoms in reli-

gious longing for future fulfillment. “Human hoping is not simply our own constructs of imaginary ideals projected onto an indifferent universe, as much modern and postmodern thought maintains,” argues John Haught. “Rather, it is the faithful carrying on of the universe’s perennial orientation toward the unknown future.”¹⁰ Conversely, breaking connections with the memory of the dead saps our moral energy to care for the earth. Haught continues: “If we are unable to symbolize immortality in one way or another, we lose any sense of relatedness to the vast world that has gone before us, as well as to generations of living beings that may follow. In breaking our connection with other generations, we forfeit our responsibility to them. Stranded in a meaninglessly brief life span, and severed with community with the perished past or the promised future, we grow ethically impotent.”¹¹ This intriguing insight highlights the importance of the interconnection of all three aspects of the communion of saints we have been exploring. Set within the life-giving history of God with the world, the community of the sacred encompasses all creation, past, present, and to come, holy people living and dead, and the whole natural world imbued with God’s blessing, together.

Conclusion

The symbol of the communion of saints expresses a solidarity among God-seekers that exists around the earth and across time itself, brought into being by the Spirit who forever weaves links of kinship throughout the world. It affirms that within the embrace of the one Spirit, all are being shaped into a community that is one of companionship rather than dominant-subordinate relations; a community, furthermore, that connects different racial, ethnic, and cultural groups, women with men, the poor and marginalized with the powerful, and all of these living with the dead and the yet to be born, in an egalitarian circle around the eucharistic table, the body of Christ, which encompasses the earth itself. Allowing this symbol its full play in ecclesial life through remembrance and hope encourages us to live lives that add to, rather than subtract from, the measure of compassion and justice in the world that the next generation will inherit. It cheers and challenges us on the path of discipleship today. In the words of New Zealand novelist Keri Hulme: “They were nothing more than people, by themselves. Even paired, any pairing, they would have been nothing more than people by themselves. But all together, they have become the heart and muscles and mind of something perilous and new, something strange and growing and great. Together, all together, they are the instruments of change.”¹²

Notes

¹A full exploration of the points made in this lecture, with copious references, may be found in Elizabeth A. Johnson, *Friends of God and Prophets: A Feminist Theological Reading of the Communion of Saints* (New York: Continuum, 1998).

²Karl Rahner, "The Life of the Dead," *Theological Investigations* IV (New York: Seabury, 1974), 353-54.

³Augustine, *Sermons*, 10 Vols., Edmund Hill, trans. & notes (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 1990-95), Sermon 280; hereafter cited in the text as S. with the sermon's number.

⁴E.g., Lawrence Cunningham, *The Meaning of Saints* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1980), 49.

⁵Adrienne Rich, "Resisting Amnesia: History and Personal Life," in *Blood, Bread, and Poetry: Selected Poems 1979-1985* (New York: Norton, 1986), 155.

⁶For discussion of method, see Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Bread Not Stone: The Challenge of Feminist Biblical Interpretation* (Boston: Beacon, 1984); for an example of results, see Rosemary Radford Ruether and Rosemary Kellers, eds., *In Our Own Voices: Four Centuries of American Women's Religious Writing* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1995).

⁷Delores Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1993), espec. 15-33.

⁸Jane Schaberg, "How Mary Magdalene Became a Whore," *Bible Review* 8, no. 5 (1992), 30-37.

⁹Maureen Tilley, "The Passion of Perpetua and Felicity," in Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, ed., *Searching the Scriptures* Vol. II (New York: Crossroad, 1994), 829-58.

¹⁰John Haught, *The Promise of Nature* (New York: Paulist, 1993), 109.

¹¹*Ibid.*, 129.

¹²Keri Hulme, *The Bone People* (New York: Penguin Books, 1983), 4.



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