

## WOMEN'S CONSULTATION IN CONSTRUCTIVE THEOLOGY

- Topic: Who Are the Friends of God Today? Constructive Responses to Elizabeth Johnson's *Friends of God and Prophets*
- Conveners: Elisabeth Brinkmann, College of New Rochelle  
Phyllis Kaminski, Saint Mary's College
- Moderator: Colleen M. Carpenter, Saint Catherine University
- Panelists: Shawnee M. Daniels-Sykes, Mount Mary College  
Janice A. Thompson, King's College, Wilkes-Barre  
Jane Carol Redmont, Guilford College

The Women's Consultation in Constructive Theology invited three panelists to respond to Elizabeth Johnson's *Friends of God and Prophets: A Feminist Theological Reading of the Communion of Saints* (1999). Shawnee M. Daniels-Sykes began the conversation by calling attention to global and ethical issues involving women and girls. Focusing on female bullying, female genital mutilation, and trafficking of women and girls, Daniels-Sykes examined cycles of gender prejudice and oppression from the perspective of women as oppressors. Drawing on the work of Paulo Freire, Daniels-Sykes described the dangerous patterns of injustice and violence which break down hope and teach women and girls to internalize oppressive practices, to the point of perpetuating violence themselves. For example, though the practice of female genital mutilation has severe mental, psychological, and physical effects, women have been socially conditioned to internalize and perpetuate it; in such communities, the invisible hand of a violent patriarchy continues to lurk. However, oppressors can unlearn internalized cycles of violence by turning to an alternative pattern of memory and hope, suggested by the communion of saints. As Elizabeth Johnson describes, the saints symbolize humans who are relational, hold equal dignity, and respond to the call of Christ. Heeding this new pattern of faith, peace, and love, modeled by the saints, calls the present world to break patterns of oppression and to welcome deep reconciliation and healing. Striving to keep memory alive, to keep hope alive, and to maintain practices of commitment will introduce women and girls into authentic solidarity.

Janice A. Thompson continued the discussion by introducing the role of narrative. She noted that, in Johnson's work, the whole community of the living and the dead are held together by stories. Next, she introduced a concrete example of Johnson's model of the communion of saints by describing the start and development of "Ruth's Place: House of Hope," a homeless shelter for women in Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania. Thompson proposed that the church which began "Ruth's Place" accepted the challenge to "respeak the silence" surrounding the issue of women's homelessness in a community that had offered shelter services only to homeless men. For the women experiencing homelessness, being told they had no story to tell was akin to being told they were not persons. Alternatively, "Ruth's

Place” established a space for community, companionship, and a safety for these women. Thompson described the powerful example of the budding narrative of memory and solidarity witnessed by the homeless women who were finally able to share their lives. In turn, embracing the edges of the homeless women’s lives reminded the church that served them of the importance of feeling worthy and loved. As each saint had her story with which one might resonate, so did these homeless women. The women and their stories, which Ruth’s Place enlivened, embodied the hope that all is renewable, all is flexible, and that these formerly invisible voiceless women on the fringes might also reveal the face and words of God.

Finally, Jane Carol Redmont explored the vision of the friends of God extending beyond a church or human community by constructing an ecofeminist ecclesiology. Redmont began with the premise that the communion of saints, as described by Johnson, included all of creation, noting the value of an ecofeminist method in unpacking the relation of saints, ethics, and ecclesial community. Culling from works of feminist theology, Redmont noted that an ecological approach invites one to decentralize the human person, that is, consider not only human life, but also the broader ecological web in which humans take part. Likewise, a feminist ecclesiological approach asks that the church be decentralized, that is, the church might be thought of more broadly than simply an institution and considered in its wider outreach in care for communities and in its promotion and performance of care for all life on Earth. In establishing such connections, Redmont pointed to the usefulness of Sarah McFarland Taylor’s recent book, *Green Sisters*, and Bill Mollison’s discussion of “permaculture” and “edge effects” as providing rich metaphors and rhetoric for developing an ecofeminist ecclesiology both in theory and practice. Redmont concluded that women, empowered with a strong sense of solidarity, have the potential to develop a greater sensitivity for the environment, and suggested that such work might be useful for ecumenical endeavors.

During the discussion following the three panelists’ approaches to *Friends of God and Prophets*, Elizabeth Johnson responded by pointing to the importance of holding stories in memory, and using them as catalysts, or inspirations, for change. Johnson underlined the problem of romanticizing women in history: though women might be called “loving,” women can perform the same destructive and oppressive tasks which undermine community and break down hope. Johnson also reminded that the earliest use of the notion of “*communio sanctorum*” spoke of the “holy things” or the Eucharist. But, its meaning over time evolved, as St. Thomas Aquinas used the term “*communio sanctorum*” interchangeably as the “holy things” and the “holy people” of the Church. Johnson concluded that moving from the bread and wine to the whole earth was not a major step in speaking of the “holy communion,” thus establishing the essential connection between the communion of saints, social justice in human communities, and ecological care.

Following the discussion, Elisabeth Brinkmann presented the Ann O'Hara Graff award to Joann Wolski Conn of Neumann University of Aston, Pennsylvania. Sandra Schneiders and Mary Ann Hinsdale offered formal congratulatory comments for the occasion.

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