



IN THE SANCTUARY OF WOMEN

A Guide for Reading Groups

Among the pages of a medieval French prayerbook, two women meet on a road. Elizabeth, having hurried from her house, leans toward her cousin Mary, one hand on her shoulder, the other on her pregnant belly in an ancient gesture of blessing. Mary, having fled to her kinswoman after giving the archangel her stunning *yes*, grasps Elizabeth with her right hand. In her other hand, Mary holds a book.

Each of them pregnant in most unusual circumstances, Mary and Elizabeth reach out with deep recognition. As they lean into one another, these two women make a sanctuary. With the arc of their bodies, with the ache of their longing for someone who understands, with the power of a blessing given and received, Mary and Elizabeth create a space of refuge, of welcome, of safety. The road on which they stand stretches past the margins of the page, far beyond their familiar terrain. But here, on this day, in the midst of a path that will take them to landscapes they can hardly now imagine, these kinswomen establish a holy place with their meeting.

And between them, in the heart of the sanctuary that they make, is a book. Most likely the book of prayer that medieval artists so often depicted Mary with at the moment of the Annunciation, when Gabriel called her to become the mother of Jesus, Mary's sacred book symbolizes the presence of Christ, the Word made flesh who is taking form in her own flesh. Her book signifies not only the depth of her personal devotion but also the connections that Christ the Word makes possible among those who seek him. For centuries, from the early Middle Ages when scribes and artists lavished their skill and care upon manuscripts that they fashioned by hand, books have been used not only for personal devotion and deepening one's relationship with God but also for cultivating relationships with others. The shared experience of reading a book can become a powerful means of fostering community and generating conversation about what matters most to us.

In the spirit of this ancient tradition, the pages of *In the Sanctuary of Women* provide a space not only for personal reflection but also for fostering conversation and forming community. This book invites you to explore how community happens, or could happen, in your own life. Like Mary and Elizabeth, where do you find sanctuary? Where do you long for it? How might this book be part of

tending or creating sanctuary with others: a space where you can find and offer refuge, understanding, and blessing; a place for speaking of what matters? What would such a sanctuary look like?

Most guides for reading groups offer a series of questions that help prompt conversation. Because *In the Sanctuary of Women* already offers many questions that you can use for reflection and discussion, this reading guide will invite you to give thought to some additional aspects of how this book might foster conversations and build relationships as you reflect together with others.

IN SEARCH OF SANCTUARY

Sometimes sanctuaries are physical spaces. More often, we create sanctuaries in the much the same manner that Mary and Elizabeth fashioned theirs: we make them of words, of blessings, of our desire to lean toward one another and to listen, that we may hear and know what someone else carries within.

You may already be part of an established group where you have found such a sanctuary: a book club, study group, prayer circle, or other configuration. If so, then this book might slide easily into the framework you already have. Whether you use a portion of the book for a season or choose to go through the entire book together, the women you will find within its pages can become powerful, evocative companions on your way.

If you are not part of an existing group, *In the Sanctuary of Women* could present an opportunity to start a new group. You might extend an invitation to others in a congregation, school, neighborhood, or other setting to come together for a set period to be in conversation about the themes and questions the book offers.

It's good to remember too that sanctuary and community can take shape in many ways. Being in conversation around the book doesn't need to be limited to being part of a group that physically meets together. How might it be, for instance, to invite a friend or a family member to read the book with you and to talk about it, perhaps once a week or once a month? For those who live far apart, reading a book together can become a wonderful, creative way to help bridge the distance. Here in the 21st century, technology opens up a remarkable array of possibilities for conversation. In addition to person-to-person phone calls, ways of connecting across distance include conference calls, Skype, e-mail, Facebook groups and other online networks such as those offered by Yahoo! Groups, and blogs. We have a wealth of ways to lean into one other to create the sanctuaries for which we long.

SHAPING SANCTUARY

There are endless ways that you might use *In the Sanctuary of Women* as a companion for group reflection. Here are a few thoughts about some of these ways.

Laying the Groundwork: Sanctuaries that take physical form usually have practices and rituals that help us navigate their space. From the gathering and invocation to the benediction and sending forth, these practices help us enter, inhabit, and depart from a sacred space. Such practices can be helpful in most any kind of community, including a reading community. Even in communities of two, it's good

to give thought to whether you want to establish familiar habits around your conversations—ways of honoring the beginning and ending of your gatherings and structuring your discussion. Your time together might include opening and/or closing blessings or prayers, a reading, and a time for catching up in addition to the time you spend reflecting together. Depending on the group, there may be agreements that would be helpful to make at the outset: how long you will journey together, whether the group will be open to guests, what the length of each gathering will be, and the like.

A Season of Sanctuary: One way you might use this book is to journey through a portion of it during a specific time of the year. For instance, the Desert Mothers, with their wisdom born of the wilderness and their ability to find God even in the starkest landscapes, are great companions during the season of Lent. Hildegard of Bingen or Harriet Powers might be good traveling partners during Advent, a season that invites us to contemplate and celebrate the gift of the incarnation and the variety of ways that Christ takes flesh again and again in this world.

Where the Question Is Born: Near the end of the introduction to each chapter, you will find several themes that the chapter invites you to ponder. Often the introduction includes core questions connected with these themes. Throughout each chapter, in many of the reflections, you will also find questions that invite you to go deeper into these themes and core questions. As you move through the book and the mini-sanctuaries it offers, where do these questions lead you? Which ones might serve as good prompts for conversation and shared reflection? Beyond the questions that the book offers, what questions surface for you?

One of the greatest gifts that we can provide for one another in groups is to help each other hold and travel with the questions that arise for us, listening to and praying for one another as we live into the answers that are sometimes so long in coming. In chapter 4, you will come across a quotation that Wendy Wright offers, one that is helpful to keep in mind as we set out into the book. She writes, “A novice master of a Trappist monastery I once visited offered this observation: To be a Christian does not mean knowing all the answers; to be a Christian means being willing to live in the part of the self where the question is born.”

Notice What You Notice: A spiritual director I saw for a number of years often told me, “Notice what you notice.” As you and your partners in the sanctuary travel together through the book, what do you notice? What strikes you? What stretches you? Where do you find comfort? Where do you encounter a challenge? Are there women in the book you find especially intriguing, whose lives and the themes they offer readily connect with your own? Are there women you find more difficult to journey with? Are there particular ideas or questions you find yourself drawn to, and others that you resist?

Noticing what we notice can tell us a great deal about what’s stirring in our souls, and it can become a great starting place for conversation. Paying attention to what draws and attracts us, as well as to what disturbs us or evokes resistance in us, is a powerful threshold into reflection and prayer. We often respond to our environment with impulses and reactions to which we give little thought. Stopping to ponder what lies beneath our initial responses—to contemplate these gut responses, to question them, to talk about them, to pray with them—can help us engage our lives and our communities in a way that is more intentional, aware, and whole.

BEYOND THE SANCTUARY

The Christian tradition makes clear that God does not mean us to pursue a life of devotion, reflection, and prayer just for ourselves alone. Moving deeper into a life with God draws us deeper into the life of the world, to participate in its beauty and in the healing of its brokenness. The medieval mystics knew this. We so often think of them for their feats of devotion and their dramatic experiences of union with God. They understood, however, that God did not intend for them to linger forever in their ecstasy. We are called to a spiral-shaped life: to turn inward, to meet and draw sustenance from the God who dwells within us; and to turn outward, to meet the world and offer it the sustenance that we have found in our solitude. Christ invites us to navigate this spiral, to find a rhythm of moving inward and turning outward that enables us to grow in wholeness and to minister to others from this wholeness.

One of the questions I often ask myself is, “What’s the invitation?” In the place where I find myself, how is God beckoning me to respond? So I ask you: What’s the invitation? As you journey through these pages, what doorways do you find? From your reflection, contemplation, and conversation, what might God be calling you to offer? Having found a sanctuary for yourself, how might you help provide it for someone else? In what ways could you and your reading partners support one another in this?

As you inhabit the sanctuary, and as you move beyond it to create spaces of sanctuary and welcome for others, I wish you blessings and peace.

© Jan L. Richardson