

WE'RE ALL CALLED TO BE PROPHETS AND MYSTICS

22



DISMISSED BY SOME AS A "RADICAL, FEMINIST NUN," BENEDICTINE SISTER JOAN CHITTISTER IS FOR MANY PEOPLE A BEACON OF HOPE AND ONE OF THE CHURCH'S KEY VISIONARY VOICES FOR MORE THAN 30 YEARS. MIGHT IT HAVE ANYTHING TO DO WITH HER IRISH ROOTS?

INTERVIEWED BY ALICIA VON STAMWITZ

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Never mind that she has a dozen honorary doctorates and a dizzying number of international awards, nor that she lectures alongside some of our generation's spiritual supernovas, like the Dalai Lama. Joan Chittister, the globetrotting Benedictine nun and prolific author from Erie, Pennsylvania, is worth watching for the same reason any serious Christian is worth watching: She's a transformed person, and transformed people have a habit of transforming other people.

Heaven knows we need someone to show us a better way. A thick darkness covers the earth as civil and religious discourse continue to deteriorate. Joan is a social psychologist with a doctorate in communications theory and a contemplative's keen eye. To many, she is a beacon of hope. Be forewarned, though: this is not your grandma's holy-card kind of hope. Joan is pious—six decades in a convent will do that to you—but her piety is laced with the potent, wildly exciting insights of modern science.

Some will warn you to keep your distance from "that radical, feminist nun." Don't mind them. Read her words and decide for yourself if this woman is dangerous or delightful. As Joan herself puts it, "We sisters are not radical. We are highly traditionalist. All of us. That's what got us where we are. We are not where we are because we *don't* believe what we were taught. We are here because we *do* believe it."

Joan spoke to *Reality* via Skype from Benetivision, a resource and research centre for contemporary spirituality in Erie that she founded and directs. She also serves as co-chair of the Global Peace Initiative of Women, a partner organization of the United Nations, and is a regular columnist for the US newspaper, *National Catholic Reporter*.

EVOLUTION

You've been speaking about theology and evolution lately. Can you tell us about that?

Science has become one of the spiritual teachers of our era. We're living in a completely different world now from when I was a child. We have to ask ourselves: Who is God in an evolutionary world?

We have to get over our old ways of thinking

about heaven, hell, and maturity. For example, you don't tell seven-year-olds, "You cannot sin." You tell them to *try* not to sin, but you have to know that they will make mistakes because evolution is quite clear: mistakes are built right into the process of our growing. Mistakes are there so we can become more mature tomorrow than we are today. We need to have the wisdom to recognize that *because* of our failings, we have learned a great deal about life. We're called to take that learning and to become more and more grounded in the love of God and in the following of Jesus.

So we're moving, you see, from one world and the spirituality that it engendered—so much pain, and a very rigorous, even neurotic acceptance of asceticism—into a cosmos that is *pure delight*, all about *possibility and development*. In that new spirituality, creation is a work-in-progress and God shares responsibility for the work with the human race. Our job is to make the earth just like the "Our Father" says: as close to heaven as we can get it.

So you have hope for the future?

Yes. But we have to stop thinking in terms of systems and begin to think in terms of ongoing creation. We're all here as co-creators. God left the world unfinished so you and I could do our part. If we don't step forward, there will be holes in this life. When we are one with God's creative intention and activity, then we're moving into holiness. That is sanctity. That is the beginning of union with God.

It's a wonderful moment to be alive! But soon we'll begin to see gaps between a theology of the past and a theology of the future. In the theology of the past, it's all about me. It's a kind of spiritual narcissism that places us at the centre of the universe and describes God as a "gotcha" God who waits for us to make a mess of things so we can be condemned to hell forever. But the theology of the future describes God as a summoning God who is saying, *Grow! Grow! Follow me and grow! Find me. Come. I'm waiting for you. I'm right here. I'm with you. I'll help you. You have nothing to fear. We're in this together because you and I are going together now, creating this world.*

If readers are moved by your words, where can they go to learn more?

My monastery! Seriously, I believe religious communities have a lot to share. Many of them are taking in lay people now, and there's such a nice movement between us. People visit monasteries and experience the depth of the spiritual life there, and then they take it out; they carry it back to their own parishes, their neighbourhoods, their families. So my advice is: Find an intentional community near you. Find a group whose members are talking about technology and exploring the new demands being made by scientific and social changes.

For example, when I was a little kid we were taught that you couldn't go into somebody else's church because that would be a mortal sin. Now, we are beginning to realize that we're all in this together, and that our respect for one another is biblical. You and I have a lot to learn from the Jewish tradition, the Protestant tradition, the Buddhist tradition, and the Hindu tradition. We have much to learn about the Face of God from the many faces God has taken in this world.

Life is rich with God, thick with God, full of God. God is not here to terrify us, to drive us away, to destroy us, to ignore us, or to make us suffer. God says, "I have come that you may have life—and have it more *abundantly*." That's where it's at. That's where God is.

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RELIGIOUS LIFE

What is the role of religious life today?

There's something about religious life, especially religious life for women, that is yet to be completely understood. The role of religious life is always to live the Gospel at the grassroots, to be where the people are, to be where the issues are, and to be more concerned about the Gospel on the streets of the world than about the custody of institutions.

The liturgy of the church belongs to the church itself, and the sacraments of the church are priestly acts. But the role of religious is to be a bridge between the streets and the sacristies.

23



Sr. Joan addresses an ecumenical gathering of women at First United Methodist Church in Pasadena, California

To take the sacristry to the streets, and to bring the people in the streets to the sacristry. That is our spirituality.

24

How does your own Benedictine community reach out to people on the streets?

When the murder rate began to rise in Erie, the Benedictine Sisters began a street liturgy in Erie called “Take Back the Site” to honour homicide victims and to “reconsecrate to life” the land where the bodies had been found. If your son was murdered on 9th and Ash, for example, the sisters went there with as many people as they could gather, and they held a prayer service, a “living liturgy” of psalms, hymns and prayers for the family.

Now, hundreds of people come, and two other religious communities have joined us. Families look forward to it, because it is publicly comforting to them in the face of their public humiliation and pain.

Can you say more about prayer?

All I know about prayer is that it gets deeper and more real every day. We Benedictines say that the contemplative is the person who sees the world the way God sees the world. Prayer comes through the eyes. What do you see when you look at the world? When you try to see the world as God sees the world, you open yourself to the movement of the Spirit, the presence of God.

In the scriptures, you see Jesus walking from Galilee to Jerusalem healing the sick, contending with the officials, and raising the dead. He did not allow despair to take over. He did not leave death in his path. He raised death every time he saw it. And he has not stopped. He has not stopped because he now functions *in us*. So when you see the world as God sees the world, when you see the trip from the temple to the street through the eyes of Jesus, then you’re very, very aware of the movement of the Spirit, the presence of God. That is prayer.

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CHURCH TODAY

Do you have any comments about the recent Vatican assessment of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious in the U.S.?

I don’t think there’s a living, thinking man or woman of this century who is going to see that as a holy act. When you want to be able to tell people what they can think, who they can listen to, what books they can read, or what questions they can ask, you are sinning against

creation. You can say, I don’t *approve* of what you’re reading. You can say, I don’t *agree* with you. You can even say, This is wrong *because...* But a man or woman cannot say to another man or woman: *You may not think. You may not ask questions.*

What’s at stake?

Well, one of the great things at stake is the credibility of the church itself—and that’s a shame. I mean, there’s no reason for this action and there’s nothing to be gained from it. In the first place, we’re not living in a monarchy any more. We’re living in a democracy that says people have the right to pursue their questions and to pursue their concerns, freely and openly. They even have the right to be wrong in the process. It’s absolutely anti-cultural to think that you can say, in the U.S. today, that for the sake of goodness and for the sake of truth, this group of people may not function. That can only make the church look very, very bad. So, somehow or other, we have to get out of this together for the sake of the church, and we can’t do that by attempting to suppress women.

You wrote recently: “Our task is to be radical Christian communities in the here and now, not fossils of a bygone reality.” Isn’t that hard to do, though, given the current climate in the church?

It is hard. But people know the church when they see it. People know when the church is active in their midst. The way you live and what you do speaks church to the people, and it speaks truth to the church as well. Church is about the dogged determination to make the Gospel plain, even in the face of individuals claiming law over love.

PERSONAL SPIRITUALITY

In times of struggle, what helps you remain faithful?

I really believe in the Holy Spirit, and I really believe in creation. I believe that some of us who are at turning points in history, moved by the Spirit and committed to an ongoing creation, will suffer dearly for that commitment. Some will indeed be rejected and declaimed. I have no doubt about it, because that’s the nature of change.

But having said that, I do not think of us as a people of the cross. I think of us as a people of the empty tomb. Alleluia people. People who go through whatever you have to go through to be part of the salvation story. I believe that if your heart knows something is right, or your mind knows something is true, and you act out of love, refusing to attack anyone, in the end it will be right.

You start by assuming that everyone wants what you want, but others might see the way forward differently. And that’s all right. We have 14 Rites in the Roman Catholic Church, because we have forever recognized the fact that people often come to the same truth by different means.

More personally, what do you, Joan, cling to in tough times?

The New Testament. The Jesus story and my real honest-to-God belief that there is a God, here present, with me, with you, in us, and leading us on. We’re stumbling, we’re making a terrible mess of things, we take one step forward and 10 steps back—but I get up every morning to reclaim those steps I lost.

Oh, I get tired. I get weary. I get frustrated. But at the same time, every day of my life—well, not every day, but from a certain point in my life when I became conscious of these things in a very personal way—I have never ceased to know the presence of God. And I know it partly because of my religious community. We

always maintain that the strength of the Erie Benedictines is that we are never all down at the same time. There’s always somebody “dragging us up” to where we were before!

Is it true that you have Irish ancestry?

Oh, do!! And I’m happy to tell you about it. Chittister is my adoptive stepfather’s name. My biological father died when I was a child, but on his side I’m a Daugherty of Donegal, and my maternal grandmother was a Castles from Dublin. I recently visited my great grandfather’s homestead—the Daugherty homestead outside of Letterkenny in Co. Donegal—and I brought back a piece of stone from the lintel of his mill. It sits on my desk and it means the world to me. Also, for the last 22 years I’ve spent three months of every year writing in a little Irish cottage in County Kerry. I swear that I hit the ground and I instantly become Joan Daugherty over there!

WIDER WORLD

Do you have any comments on the Irish Catholic Church?

Well, they are struggling, but in the most ethically honest way. They’ve named their problems, they’ve faced their problems, and they have held the church to a high sense of accountability about those problems. I see the Irish as very healthy and honest and intelligent people. I don’t know what will happen next to the church there, but I can tell you it will change or it will not exist.



The role of religious is to be a bridge between the streets and the sacristies



Sr. Joan Chittister in 2001

From a global perspective, what do you think is the most dangerous heresy or evil facing the world today?

I think the greatest evil starts with the suppression of any peoples. When any group feels that they have the right to destroy, enslave, suppress, or ignore any other part of the human race, God is not there.

I do a lot of work with women, and when you look around and realize what is happening to the women of the world *because they are women*—because someone, somewhere, has decided that women need less, want less, or deserve less—that has to be evil. That has to be wrong. I don’t care what reason you give for it: once you refuse to allow other human beings to develop to the fullness of themselves, that’s the epitome of evil. And it is residual in every single society. You can call it by any name you want—racism, sexism, classism—that is the great evil that we perpetrate on one another. And if you and I sit back and say nothing about it, we’re part of it.

You’ve been described as a prophet and a mystic. I wonder what you think of that?

I believe that we’re all called to union with God. I believe that we’re all called to speak the word of God in ungodly places and to ungodly situations. So my answer is that we’re all called to be prophets and mystics. The important thing is you know who you are at all times. Be who you are at all times! Never let any words seduce or confuse you. Put the centre of your heart in the hands of God and you will be fine. **B**

25