

DEAR
JOAN
CHITTISTER

*Conversations with
Women in the Church*

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INTRODUCTION

Dear Reader,

Halfway through the inaugural Joan Chittister Institute for Contemporary Spirituality (JCICS), ten millennial Catholic women crammed onto a raised platform for a panel discussion on hopes, struggles, and the future of the church. We traveled from across the country—and even Australia—to learn from Joan Chittister and connect with other women asking similar life questions. The two weeks we spent with the Benedictine Sisters of Erie ignited our hearts—and the publication of this book.

That night, our chairs formed a zigzag horseshoe as we scrunched to make space for all the panelists. After minutes of maneuvering, we were set—as long as no one needed to turn, lift, or bend anything. About thirty minutes in, amid a rousing dialogue on seminary life, the back legs of one of our chairs scooted off the platform. In a fluid motion, nine sets of hands reached for our middle panelist to stop

her from tipping backwards. The audience gasped as she calmly reclaimed her balance—impressively, with almost a full beer still intact. Without missing a beat, another panelist grabbed the microphone and deadpanned, “Friend, thank you for demonstrating the experience of women in the church.”

The community roared with laughter while the truth of her words sunk deep. Women and other marginalized persons know what it’s like to be nudged aside—or not offered a seat in the first place. We know the edge can be a painful, lonely place.

If you find yourself there, please know: you are not alone.

The chair-tilt fiasco ended in smiles not stitches because other women reached out in support. This is church at its best—present, attentive, active. This is the church we experienced during our two weeks at the Joan Chittister Institute for Contemporary Spirituality. This is the church we invite you to be a part of through this book.

On the first day of the Institute, Joan mandated us to “speak our truths.” As we grappled with our truths and found the courage to speak them to ourselves and then to each other, we began to dream of offering them to you. This book, *Dear Joan Chittister*, is a collection of our truths. We share experiences of sisterhood and living our truths in a world that would often rather have us be silent. We give these stories to you so that you might find the courage to

Speak your own truth wherever you please. We hope you can find or create supporting communities that hold your truths with reverence and awe.

The stories we share come from our personal experiences and are tied to a question or an insight for the great spiritual master, Sr. Joan Chittister, OSB. She responds to us with her prophetic wisdom at the beginning of each section and the end of each letter.

We hope our stories become the hands reaching out to pull you back onto the stage from the edge. As you read our truths, we hope that you are inspired to start conversations of your own:

- Who is part of your community?
- What truths do you long to speak?
- How might you stand up to the patriarchy and other injustices?

Thank you for your support,

Jessie



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*on
sisterhood*

I SAT IN THE HUDDLE OF A DOZEN PEOPLE ALL ANALYZING THE PRESENT STATE OF NATIONAL AFFAIRS, all concerned about the negativity and mean-spirited tone that now colors what was once called “The American Way.”

Most of all, the social deterioration that went with the culture wars worried everyone there. We were sitting at a table where one generation, whose lives had developed in a very different kind of society than is shaping younger generations now, judged the future of the country to be poor. Very poor. Until, suddenly, the younger man to my left sat forward in his chair, raised his shoulders, straightened his back, and declared with full throat, “You’re all forgetting something,” he said and paused thoughtfully. “The women are coming. Just look at the numbers of women being elected to positions everywhere—and women are not going to allow this mess to go on.”

Well, if the education statistics are correct, more women than men are enrolling in college and going on for more graduate degrees or professional certifications than ever in history. If the rise in the number of women politicians is correct, there is a clear presence of the women’s agenda in public decision-making arenas now. If social trends are correct, most women now engage in paid work as commonly

and for as long as their male counterparts. And, in addition, if self-reliance is still an American value, the younger generation is either marrying later or marrying less.

Indeed, sisterhood and the community of female support, understanding, organizations, and goals that have emerged in the process are now a phenomenon, barely one hundred fifty years old in the making. For a confluence of reasons—higher education, social change, urbanization, and systems—women, too, for the first time in history, also meet, talk, plan, and figure out their lives together. From the Women’s Suffrage Movement to the Me Too moment, women have been searching out like-minded women to learn from, connecting with women leaders and encouraging one another to become a force in society. Independent of men. Distinct from men. Despite men everywhere—in politics, business, education, and even the churches. And they are affecting every level, dimension, and direction of society with them. More slowly than they would like, surely, but faster than any previous generation—physically separated from one another as well as the world—was ever able to do.

Younger women today take these things for granted. They have their eyes on positions and places of power. They want change but not just any change. They want development that honors their own experiences and aspirations. They want to live fully human, human lives. They want to get the woman-man balance right. They want to be seen as disciples of Jesus, called to do a mission—even in the church.

Then they are amazed to find out that the glass ceiling is still a ceiling, even for them. Less visible now, yes, but no less there.

The questions they are asking themselves as they go sound the knell: Tomorrow will no longer be a repetition of yesterday. They are bent on figuring it out for themselves. And so this dialogue about it...between me and them.

Joan

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Dear Joan,

My mother gave me so many gifts: self-reliance, a reverence for libraries, nightly family dinners, an understanding that you must take action whenever your conscience aches. But she didn't give me a sister.

It never occurred to me to be troubled by that when I was a child, and she gave me no indication that she was troubled either. But one day, when I was about thirteen years old, she apologized to me for this void in my life.

"I was thinking," she said, remorse soaking each word, "my sister is the most important relationship I have—the person I've known the longest, who understands me and loves me without question. We were girls together, and we're women together. And I wish I had given you someone like that."

I was in the habit of rolling my eyes at most of what my mother said to me at that age, but I sensed that this mattered too much for adolescent hostility. We sat silently for

a few minutes, thinking about this predicament I was in, thinking about what it meant.

Then she said, “Alright. Here’s what you’ll do. From now on, I want you to think of every woman and girl you meet as your sister. I don’t want you to compare yourself to them or think of them as competition. You can just know that you’re women together and try to love them, and let them love you.”

I recognized, even then, that she had just described the person I wanted to be.

I’ve failed to fulfill her mandate countless times, but I do try to be a sister to the women and girls around me, even those who intimidate me or test the bounds of my patience. And being a sister among sisters has been its own reward. The young girls I mentor, the women I came of age alongside, and the wisdom figures who share life with me bring me joy and grief and rage and hope. And fullness, always fullness.

You, of course, know what this is like, after more than fifty years in a women’s religious community. And your writings, from *Heart of Flesh* to *Friendship of Women*, prove it. You know that the intimacy and trust between sisters can bring us to sterile domestic violence shelters, ugly jail cells, and chilled hospital rooms, just as it can lead us to eye-watering laughing fits, hard-won graduation ceremonies, and searing honesty on late-night long-distance phone calls.

I wonder: how can we encourage more women to recognize each other as sisters? Women are so often pitted against each other and undermined. We're taught from childhood that there is no higher compliment than "you're not like other girls." It's difficult to break through that conditioning.

But we both know that this will be a different, better world when we refuse to feel superior to or threatened by other women and when we let them really love us, however flawed and powerful we may be. I hope that a greater sense of shared sisterhood is coming, in my own life and throughout our culture. And I hope you and your community, with all your experiences as Benedictine Sisters, will continue to show us how it's done.

Yours,

Jacqueline



DEAR JACKIE,

Your letter strikes a range of chords in me. I have been dealing with the subject of sisterhood, of womanhood, all my life.

Like you, I had no sister; I am an only child. When I grew up, that was considered a decided disadvantage. People

were more likely to say, “Oh, you poor child,” at the thought of my growing up alone than they were to say “how wonderful” it was that I was an independent girl-child.

Nor did any of them seem to realize or understand the implications of what it means to be a girl alone in society rather than a boy. Boys could play sports and so had built-in companions whether they had siblings or not. Boys could roam at will while girls’ outside activities were limited, socially defined, monitored. Boys were encouraged to get jobs and so got the money that went with them. Girls got “allowances”—small ones—because “girls didn’t need money as boys did.” Boys went on camping trips, business trips, family trips with their fathers, their teachers, their boy scout leaders. In unending ways, boys were mentored into the male skills and the male responsibility they needed to take on the world.

Girls, on the other hand, were expected to stay at home to help their mothers, to continue the world as they knew it, to do the housekeeping women were meant to do. Any ideas about a future for women beyond that were largely ignored.

Most of all, girls—especially those without sisters to lean on—lacked the model of older, more experienced women. Mothers, of course, molded the lives of generations of daughters but were of little currency in the search for more experienced public insights or as editors of women’s lives in general. We all knew they were going to marry one of these

world-changing boys rather than become a leading professional or self-sustaining adult themselves.

Still, however little social norms encouraged women's groups or women's discussions as tools of development, I discovered better. Women totally beyond the boundaries of the family introduced me to the world and changed my life forever. Without them, I wonder if I would be writing this letter to you today.

The first woman who enabled me to think beyond the mold, a swimming coach at the local YWCA, took my young middle-school years and turned them into possibilities. From her, I experienced the chance of being heard. I got a vision of what it was to be an independent woman.

She was physically beautiful, long-legged, secure, and entirely at ease with herself. Without saying a thing, she taught me to want to be the same. She coached me into a junior lifesaving certificate before I was thirteen. She grew me into the ability to endure, to have confidence, to find the kind of inner strength that hours in a swimming pool forms in a person. By the time I left those YWCA years for high school, thanks to her womanhood, I was intent on becoming a responsible, sturdy, self-directed woman myself.

Then the greatest of all the womanly influences in my life—real Sisterhood—took over. The Benedictine Sisters of Erie, and, in many cases, women religious everywhere, taught me the power of spiritual solidarity. These sisters,

without a man in sight, demonstrated spiritual purpose, the power of which I had never before seen.

I watched these women create public projects and accomplish them with few resources but the holy intention it took to complete them. They designed, built, and administered their own academy and paid for it themselves. They pooled their talents and encouraged the young women who came after them both to achieve academically and to succeed in the public arena as well.

The sisters made human community real. Strangers to one another when they came to the monastery, they became one another's keepers for all their lives. It seemed as if they had decided that their common heart was up to scaling any mountain in front of them as long as they were doing it together.

They were educated in every subject. Women religious, they were nevertheless professionals in a world where professional women were few and far between. They proved that a woman does not become less womanly as she grows into the fullness of her womanhood. On the contrary, they helped us move from childhood to young adulthood and supported one another, as well.

The sisters were women who valued women. They were strong personalities who set the sights of my generation on spiritual depth and on the wisdom figures of life; they were women who took their place in the modern world as women religious had for centuries, with the gospel in one hand and a list of human needs in the other.

They were women who imaged the community of women beyond any of the limiting definitions of women being sold to them by either state or church. They showed other women how to reach beyond the boundary lines of the male society and become who they were rather than who men said they were to be. They did not shrink from life, and they formed us to live it fully, as well. It is that modeling of women with and for women that creates real sisterhood. The image of the sisters changed me. They stretched me to think beyond myself as woman to the needs of women everywhere; they encouraged me to dream daring dreams and to pursue them. It was, in the end, sisterhood that brought me home to myself. May it forever do the same for you.

Most important of all, may you yourself enable women to join together for good, to support and encourage other women, to see womanhood as the missing dimension of a just and equal life in both church and state.

As your mother told you, Jackie, love every woman you meet in ways that help her become the fullness of herself. Then our sisterhood, too, will be both the gift and the beacon that it is meant to be.

With affection,

Joan