

JOAN
CHITTISTER

Awakenings

Prophetic Reflections

Awakenings

SAMPLE

Awakenings

Prophetic Reflections



JOAN CHITTISTER

Edited by

*Mary Lou Kownacki
and Mary Hembrow Snyder*





Published in Australia by
Garratt Publishing
32 Glenvale Crescent
Mulgrave, VIC 3170
www.garrattpublishing.com.au

Copyright in this work remains the property of the contributing authors.

Copyright © 2022 Mary Lou Kownacki and Mary Hembrow Snyder.

The sources listed on pages 229–231 represent an extension of this copyright page.

First published in 2022 by Orbis Books.

This edition published by arrangement with Orbis Books.

Manuscript editing and typesetting by Joan Weber Laflamme.

Cover design: Regina Gelfer

Cover image: iStock

All rights reserved. Except as provided by the Australian copyright law, no part of this book may be reproduced in any way without permission in writing from the publisher.

ISBN 9781922484406

Cataloguing in Publication information for this title is available from the National Library of Australia.

www.nla.gov.au

The authors and publisher gratefully acknowledge the permission granted to reproduce the copyright material in this book. Every effort has been made to trace copyright holders and to obtain their permission for the use of copyright material.

The publisher apologises for any errors or omissions in the above list and would be grateful if notified of any corrections that should be incorporated in future reprints or editions of this book.

To Susan Doubet

SAMPLE

Contents

<i>Acknowledgments</i>	ix
<i>Foreword by Tom Roberts</i>	xi

Part I **Women in the Church:** **The Fundamental Justice Issue**

<i>Introduction by Mary Hembrow Snyder</i>	3
1. Theology of Domination	5
2. Women in the Church	9
3. Discipleship	27
4. Wanted: The Other Half of the Church	39
5. Mary	49
6. The Visitation	57
7. God Our Father, God Our Mother	63
8. The Woman Who Wouldn't	77

Part II **Seeds of a New Spirituality**

<i>Introduction by Mary Hembrow Snyder</i>	89
9. The Burden of Nonviolence	91
10. The Place of Prophecy in Dark Times	95

11. Oh, Wonder of Wonders	105
12. What Does It Mean to Be Human?	109
13. Thirst for Beauty, Thirst for Soul	115
14. God Become Infinitely Larger	123
15. Dear Sisters and Brothers of South America	139
16. The Struggle between Confusion and Expectation	147
17. Fasting	155
18. Seeds of a New Humanity	161
19. Stages in the Spiritual Life	163

Part III

Ever Ancient, Ever New: The Monastic Vision

<i>Introduction by Mary Hembrow Snyder</i>	167
20. St. Benedict of Nursia, Benedictine Monasticism and Peace	169
21. Vows	173
22. Old Vision for a New Age	177
23. The Monastic Spirit and the Pursuit of Everlasting Beauty	195
24. Monasticism in a Mobile World	201
25. Being Benedictine	209
<i>Afterword by Joan Chittister</i>	225
<i>Sources</i>	229

Acknowledgments

This book is dedicated to Erie Benedictine Sister Susan Doubet. The editors put this book together, but without the generous and painstaking work of Sister Susan, the book would not be published. As Joan Chittister's personal archivist, she made all of Sister Joan's previously published articles readily available, formatted all the content, and solicited all of the permissions from the original publishers. Thank you, Sue, for one more project so masterfully completed.

We would also like to acknowledge Sister Anne Wambach, OSB, for proofreading the text. And, of course, our gratitude to Tom Roberts, the author of Sister Joan's biography, for providing his insightful Foreword. We are also thankful to Robert Ellsberg, editor-in-chief and publisher of Orbis Books, for encouraging this book.

Foreword

Tom Roberts

In the late 1970s, Sister Joan Chittister, then occupying several positions of leadership in the world of women religious, had an opportunity to meet with Cardinal Eduardo Francisco Pironio, prefect of the Vatican office that oversaw religious life. Pironio, known as a champion of human rights in his home country of Argentina, was a man Chittister much admired. She recalls him as a kind man who agreed to meet in his office with her and other women religious leaders. He patiently listened to the case she was presenting.

“Everything that is written about us is written without us,” she told him. “The only input that the church takes on the women’s issue is what we do on the steps outside your closed doors. After you issue your bulletins defining us as lower and lesser kinds of human beings, we react to them. Dissent is the only ministry a woman has in the church, and when we react you call us radical feminists and heretics.”

She said Pironio agreed. “What you say is true,” he said. But then he added, “You must only say it here, among us here. You must never say it outside. That is harmful to the church.” She said she responded by telling him that women never got

Tom Roberts is former editor of *National Catholic Reporter* and author of *Joan Chittister: Her Journey from Certainty to Faith*.

invited “in here where you decide our lives. We’re invisible.” She told him, “I will never be quiet. I will not keep that law of silence.”

The exchange embodied the debate over women’s role in the church that goes on to this day.

The scene in Pironio’s office demonstrated that the tension was not so much a product of debate between correct dogma and a violation of tradition. After all, the curial official had told her she was correct. The tension was, and remains, between an undeniable reality—the exclusion of women from positions of real authority and decision-making in the church, including those positions that determined their lives—and a culture intent on maintaining that reality for its own benefit. The texts that follow demonstrate clearly that Chittister kept her promise to the cardinal: she has not been silent.

She has written continuously: books, columns, speeches, essays. She has carried her message around the globe. Well into her eighties, she still sorts through invitations from around the world. She has not been deterred by bishops who have refused to allow her to speak on “Catholic” premises. She speaks in the churches of other denominations, on campuses, at sites where intellectual inquiry and spiritual search go on. She gives retreats, in person and online, and maintains a level of correspondence that would be a full-time calling for most others.

This presentation of her work is, as favor and guide to readers, segmented into major themes. While real life is more complex and interwoven than the page will permit, there is no mistaking in either case that her advocacy for women and their place in church and beyond has been at the core of all she has done from the earliest moments of her public life.

The cause arose initially and remains for her a fundamental issue of justice. The church’s treatment of women, is, she believes, not a matter of theological rigor but rather a manifestation of defective anthropology. Perhaps most consequential is her

conviction that the church's treatment of women reflects the inadequacy of a God imagined and defined within the tight boundaries of an all-male, celibate, clerical culture.

For Chittister, the issue was never confined to the institutional exclusion of women from ordination. She supports women's efforts in that regard, of course, but it was never central to her work. Her concerns pierce to a much deeper level, to the institution's foundational understanding of God as a male figure, explicable only in male terms. Her questions aim at what she perceives as an institutional flaw that long preceded the ordination rite we know today and that affects all women, not only those who feel a call to formal priesthood.

For challenging such long-held characterizations of God and their implications for women, Chittister was early on tagged a dissenter. It is a label she doesn't dispute. As she told the cardinal, it is a woman's ministry. It is necessary to understand, however, that for Chittister dissent is not synonymous with rupture. Quite the contrary, as she notes in her essay on prophecy. The ancient prophets, she notes, "refused to believe that keeping the rules was the same as keeping the covenant." Religion "was not about the way a people went about ritual," but rather, "about the way people go about life."

Then and now, she announces, "Prophecy lights up the sky with questions."

Her questions rattled the institution, sometimes to the core, and its reactions could be severe. Her agreement to give an opening speech on discipleship at a conference in Ireland dealing with women's ordination brought the wrath of the Vatican down on her and placed her small Benedictine community in Erie in serious jeopardy. The short of it is that the community survived, and Chittister escaped without serious sanction. But the episode demonstrated with a bracing clarity that being a keeper of the kind of questions contained in these pages, questions challenging the institution to take stock of itself and the shaky foundations

upon which some central presumptions are constructed, can be a dangerous undertaking.

If Chittister is a dissenter, she is not a contrarian or someone dismissive of tradition. Her fidelity to the Benedictine tradition, one of the oldest in the church, is beyond question. It was a tradition, however, that she began living out, as she puts it, “with one foot in a religious life spawned by the Council of Trent and the other in a religious life awash in Vatican II.”

It is understandable, then, that some of the questions lighting up this prophet’s little corner of the universe should have to do with the future of religious life in the post–Vatican II world. That question drove her back to Benedict and his sixth-century Rule.

She wrote, “Written in a period of social collapse, of colonial oppression, of ethnic divides, of slavery and classism and patriarchal privilege, on the brink of what historians call AD 536, the worst year ever in the western world, the Rule of Benedict becomes then a model of justice, a beacon of equality, a sign of peace between strangers which we, now, must rekindle in every age.”

Chittister has spent a great deal of time plumbing the depths of the Rule and interpreting it for today, investing in the Benedictine way her belief that it contains wisdom enough to save civilization for another fifteen hundred years.

If Benedict—his understanding of the gospel and his model for religious life—is her touchstone, the starting point from which her apologetics on a wide range of issues proceed, Hildegard of Bingen is a soul mate. Chittister writes of Hildegard with an understanding that can only derive from shared passion and familiarity with what it means to dissent, in the Benedictine tradition, as a means of holding an institution to its highest ideals.

Hildegard removed herself and her community of sisters from the oversight of men when such a move was wildly more unthinkable than it is today. She railed against the clericalism of her day and dared to hold the princes of the church in her era accountable for their breaches of trust with the Catholic

community. Her refusal to alter her conviction about a matter of justice placed her community in jeopardy. Joan has a soul mate in history. It is not incidental that, nearly a millennium hence, it is Hildegard of Bingen's example and witness and not the actions of those who deemed her out of line that we recall and that the church now celebrates.

Joan's reverence for the founder, Benedict, and such figures as Hildegard of Bingen go a long way in explaining the path of her vocation and her endurance against some significant odds. But it doesn't explain everything.

At the very heart of the matter there has to be more than historic example or an enormous capacity for justice and compassion. That essential, animating force for Chittister is the God of light, the God who cannot be contained, who exists well beyond the limits of our imaginations, a God intimately personal yet beyond our understanding of person.

Benedict is intertwined with her insights into the nature of God, which developed over decades as her growing perception enabled her to free God from the thick carapace of masculine images and characteristics that had accrued over centuries. In Benedict's Rule, she writes, the "first degree of humility, the first step on the way to God, is to have always before our eyes what the ancients call the fear of God—what we know as the sense of God, the awe of God, the awareness of God, the presence of God." Into his era he dared introduce the thought, says Chittister, that our "first step to union with God is knowing that you already have God, you already enjoy God, you already contain within yourself the life that is God."

And if that God is without limit, with dimensions beyond our capacity to understand, then no boundaries exist to contain the prophet's critical gaze, no aspect of life is beyond the curiosity of the spiritual teacher.

The consequence is an offering such as this, a sampling of the prophet's concern as her eye ranges over the civil and ecclesial

landscape, calling out the mighty for hypocrisy and injustice, flawed thinking and self-interested authority. And for those seeking the contemplative way amid the “dailiness” of life, the spiritual guide offers wisdom, compassion, and the extended love of a community.

We are all beneficiaries of Joan Chittister’s decision early on to take the risk and break the silence.

SAMPLE

JOAN CHITTISTER

Awakenings

Edited by Mary Lou Kownacki and Mary Hembrow Snyder

Foreword by Tom Roberts

“Sr Joan Chittister embodies the triumph of hope over discouragement. A brave act of witness by a modern Doctor of the Church, this eloquent record of a long and faithful life is needed more now than ever.”

—James Carroll, author, *The Truth at the Heart of the Lie*

“Awakenings is a story of integration, that of a prophetic woman ever seeking liberating justice for her church and her world, animated by the empowering wisdom of the Benedictine monastic tradition. This book interweaves three musical chords—the presence of God, the call to spiritual insight, and the rejection of sexism—that have sustained Joan through her long and inspiring life. No doubt, they will also sustain and empower all who draw on this rich legacy.”

—Diarmuid O’Murchu, author, *Doing Theology in an Evolutionary Way*

“Like Hildegard of Bingen, Joan Chittister dissents by ‘daring to be herself.’ Her ‘awakenings’ depict a devoted advocate for the Divine Feminine, who urges us to move beyond compliance and conformity, listening to the voice of God within us, awake to everything and everyone around us, to forge our own nonviolent spiritual paths transforming the fruits of our contemplation into hospitable action.”

—Patrick Henry, professor emeritus, Whitman College

Joan Chittister, a member of the Benedictine Sisters of Erie, PA, is one of the most influential religious and social leaders of our time. She is the author of over 60 books, including *The Way of the Cross*, *A Passion for Life*, *There Is a Season*, *The Way We Were*, and *Illuminated Life*.

Mary Hembrow Snyder is professor emerita of Catholic Theology & Religious Studies who taught at Mercyhurst University for over three decades. She edited *Spiritual Questions for the Twenty-First Century: Essays in Honor of Joan D Chittister* and co-edited *Joan Chittister: Essential Writings* with Mary Lou Kownacki. Dr Snyder is also an Erie Benedictine Oblate.

Mary Lou Kownacki, OSB, is the director of Monasteries of the Heart, an online monastic movement, and Benetvision Publishing in Erie, PA. She served as executive director of Pax Christi USA, the national Catholic peace movement, and was presented its Teacher Peace Award in 2006.



www.garrattpublishing.com.au

