

# BE NOT SILENT



WILLIAM CARTER

## Sister Joan Chittister Speaks Out On War, Feminism, And The Catholic Church

JAMES KULLANDER

**W**hen Bill Moyers interviewed Sister Joan Chittister on his PBS news program NOW, he began by saying, "It's always surprising to me to discover that nuns look like you." Chittister chuckled and replied, "Well, what does a nun look like?" She doesn't behave according to the common, mostly unflattering image of nuns: part demure acolytes prostrating themselves at the altar rail, part embittered schoolmarm's smacking mischievous students' knuckles with wooden rulers. Chittister is demure in neither stature nor stride, and if she harbors any bitterness, it seems she has alchemically transmuted it into an untiring advocacy for the common good.

When I first heard Chittister enthral more than a thousand people at a 2004 conference in New York City, I discovered that she is one of the most outspoken and articulate social critics and religious leaders of our time. As she spoke in that hotel ballroom, the sheer authority of her voice and the force of her indictment of religious hypocrisy, economic injustice, and political intolerance made me feel as if I were being pressed back against the plush, red-cushioned seat, as when a plane takes off. She delivered a staggering list of statistics on the rising percentage of civilian casualties in war: from 15 percent of total wartime casualties in World War I to 93 percent of the total casualties in Iraq. "Why are we surprised?" she asked. "It has been the century of total war: an age of genocide, of civilian slaughter. Sixty million in the twentieth century alone. But what is forgotten today — what is unnoted, unmarked, and unmemorialized — is the fact that most of these dead, most of these civilians on whom war falls most mercilessly, are women and children."

Now seventy, Chittister has been a nun for fifty-five years. She entered religious life in 1952 and took final vows as a Benedictine Sister of Erie, Pennsylvania, in 1957. In the 1960s she saw the Church undergo the renewal of the Second Vatican Council. "It did not feel like 'renewal' then," Chittister writes in her 2005 book *The Way We Were: A Story of Conversion and Renewal* (Orbis Books). "It felt like disaster, like loss, like liberation, like life gone wild. And it felt like all of them all at once." After Vatican II, the Benedictine Sisters opened soup kitchens, halfway houses, and retreat centers. They worked on educating the poor and housing the elderly. They even wound up in jail for protesting the Vietnam War.

Over the years, Chittister has been a leader in numerous Catholic women's organizations. She is the founder and executive director of *Benetvision*, a resource-and-research center for contemporary spirituality in Erie, Pennsylvania. And she is the author of more than thirty books, including *Heart of Flesh: A Feminist Spirituality for Women and Men*; *The Story of Ruth: Twelve Moments in Every Woman's Life* (both *Eerdmans*); *Illuminated Life: Monastic Wisdom for Seekers of Light* (Orbis Books); and *Called to Question: A Spiritual Memoir* (Sheed and Ward). A regular columnist for the *National Catholic Reporter*, Chittister has received eleven honorary degrees and awards from universities and countless recognitions of her work for justice, peace, and equality — especially for women — in the Church and in society. She serves as co-chair of the *Global Peace Initiative of Women Religious and Spiritual Leaders*, a partner organization of the United

*Nations facilitating a worldwide network of women advocating for peace, particularly in Israel and Palestine.*

Chittister and I met in a well-appointed room on the twenty-second floor of a hotel near Times Square in New York City. The day before, she had returned from Syria, where she had been part of a delegation promoting citizen-to-citizen dialogue between the United States and the Middle East. It was a clear November afternoon, and the window looked west, across the Hudson River. As we spoke, the sun went down over the smoldering industrial plains of New Jersey, which had an incongruous beauty in the orange glow of sunset.

**Kullander:** You're engaged in political affairs, but you're also a religious person. Do you feel more politically engaged than religiously engaged? Or is this a false dichotomy?

**Chittister:** I wouldn't be involving myself with social questions if I weren't a Benedictine Sister. I am not a politician. Nor was Jesus. But he kept pointing out how the system failed the people it purported to serve.

Benedictines read from the Scriptures three times a day, every day. We start on page one of Genesis and continue on, reading a little at a time, until we reach the last page of Revelations. Then we start all over again. I would not be doing what I'm doing now if I were not hearing the psalmists and the prophets dealing with much the same problems in their time, and if I did not have the story of Jesus walking from Galilee to Jerusalem, picking people up out of the dust, raising people from the dead, curing lepers, and giving sight to the blind.

**Kullander:** I had an Old Testament professor at Union Theological Seminary who said she saw the trials and tribulations lamented by the psalmists and the prophets every day in the headlines of the *New York Times*.

**Chittister:** That's exactly right. My own efforts are not political acts for me. What I do has nothing to do with politics, and everything to do with justice, equality, compassion, and mercy. We're here to take care of the garden, but we're tearing it apart. If you have a religious heart, how can you not speak to this? How can you not be there with the poorest of the poor, who are bearing the brunt of the sins of this system? This, for me, is a religious and spiritual obligation — nothing more and nothing less.

**Kullander:** Isn't the religious Right making the same argument you're making about the fundamental connection between religion and politics?

**Chittister:** It is one thing to contribute to the public discussion of political issues so that laws can be passed on behalf of the common good. It is entirely another to attempt to cement one's own religious principles into the law of the land in a pluralistic society. For instance, the Catholic Church has always opposed divorce, but to my knowledge no Catholic group has ever attempted to outlaw divorce for those whose religions allow it. Nor did Catholics try to get the government to close hamburger stands on Fridays because we didn't eat meat on that day. The Women's Christian Temperance Union tried banning alcohol in this country, and it didn't work. That doesn't mean people approve of alcoholism. It simply means that try-

ing to outlaw all alcohol because some people are abusing it is a greater injustice. There's no reason we can't have laws against public drunkenness, but we don't have to criminalize every glass of wine.

In a pluralistic society such as ours, it is up to the churches to try to influence public behavior according to their own moral values. We Catholics can encourage people to stay married, but the possibility for divorce should still be there when the alternative is worse.

**Kullander:** We hear a lot today about "spiritual activism." Can you define that for me?

**Chittister:** I don't call it "activism." I call it "spiritual *action* in response to the call of the prophets and the psalmists." It's that simple for me. I can't make it theoretical. I just know that after I sit in a chapel and read the Scriptures and pray the Psalms, I want to go into the world and help. And the energy for helping comes from that tradition of God's justice and mercy.

**Kullander:** What brings you to New York City right now?

**Chittister:** This is an important moment. It's the first national meeting of women Muslim leaders in the United States, organized by ASMA, the American Society for Muslim Advancement. The purpose of the meeting is to give Muslim women in this country an arena, a voice, and an identity. I have the hope that this meeting might be the beginning of a sort of women's movement within the Muslim community.

Women everywhere are attempting to promote equality in their own societies, as well as reach across national boundaries to others. I'm co-chair of the Global Peace Initiative of Women Religious and Spiritual Leaders, along with a Buddhist nun, a Hindu nun, an Orthodox Jew, an Islamic scholar, and an ordained Protestant woman. At last year's meeting, here in New York City, we brought forty women from Iraq to talk with American women about the situation in Iraq. After that meeting, the Syrian ambassador to the U.S. invited us to come to his country, so that people in Syria could see for themselves that not all Americans hate them. This man has been sitting in Washington, D.C., and our government refuses to speak to him. So we made up our minds to go in an act of peer-to-peer diplomacy and tell people there that the political agendas creating tension between our countries are not our agendas.

It was wonderful. We visited with all the major religious leaders, including Greek Orthodox and Armenian Orthodox patriarchs, and Sunni and Shiite imams. They all said that the anti-Americanism and unrest in the Arab world will not end until the Palestinian problem is solved. And they consider the U.S. to be the reason why negotiations are not going on, because Israel need not negotiate so long as the U.S. keeps providing weapons and supporting the boundaries and barriers Israel desires.



JOAN CHITTISTER

For the sake of the globe, we cannot allow this to go on much longer. In this country, we are not looking at the situation with clear eyes and an open heart. These people in the Middle East do not want to become Westernized and do not want to have the West involved in their affairs.

In a sense, the U.S. is the largest island in the world. We're bounded by huge oceans to the east and the west and by a lightly populated country to our north and a poor country to our south. We have never felt our borders pressured. We sit in a kind of arrogant security and see ourselves as a messianic people, as liberators. We consider it obscene that anyone would resist us. But we are no longer perceived as liberators in the rest of the world. Years ago I was part of a number of delegations that went to the Soviet Union. At the time, the Soviet

Union was this big black bear. Now we're the big black bear.

**Kullander:** You must see a lot of anti-Americanism in your travels.

**Chittister:** Not only do I see a lot of it, I also see a shift in it. I started traveling the world in the early 1970s. At that time, if you walked into a room in a foreign country and people knew you were an American, everyone wanted to talk to you about how wonderful the U.S. was and how grateful they were for what the U.S. had done. Now if they know you're an American, they are wary and somewhat distant. And if you get into any kind of real conversation with them, they're sure to let you know that something's wrong with the way our country is behaving.

**Kullander:** When did this shift occur?

**Chittister:** When the U.S. invaded Iraq in 2003 — no doubt about it. People in the Middle East now see us as a rogue state. They see us as the problem. It's going to take a great change in attitude on the part of the U.S. government to rectify the situation.

**Kullander:** What's your reaction to the Democratic victory in Congress in the last election?

**Chittister:** I'm convinced there is a basic honesty in this country that operates beyond partisan politics, and we saw it come out in the last election. But there is also a basic innocence — if not ignorance — in the U.S. When foreigners come here and see our news broadcasts, they are not only surprised, but shocked and insulted at the dearth of international coverage. One woman from Syria told me that she was in the U.S. for months and seldom heard her country mentioned in the news — and then only as a problem. We pay so little attention to the rest of the world.

As a history teacher I used to teach high-school kids about the fall of the Roman Empire. I talked about the advances the empire had brought: the Roman road system, the creation of world trade, the integration of different cultures. The Roman Empire gave a kind of order to the nations it encompassed. But it spread itself too thin. The more places Rome conquered,

**It makes us feel secure to take the checklist and say that we did three Our Fathers and three Hail Marys, so we're going to heaven. But what if we really believed that Jesus called on us to be conscious and moral members of society? And what if the Church said that was true, too?**

the more places it had to station troops to enforce Roman law. And the more troops Rome sent out into the world, the more taxes it had to raise. But the poor people on whom the taxes were levied ultimately couldn't pay any more. So these people began to lose their farms and eventually couldn't feed themselves. You don't have to be a political scientist to see the parallels between the Roman Empire and U.S. foreign policy.

**Kullander:** We're now at a point in this country where many more people are beginning to ask serious questions about our role in Iraq: how we got there, what we're doing there, and how we're going to get out. What do you think should be done?

**Chittister:** The fact is we should never have invaded Iraq in the first place. Now we have a terrible mess. And we cannot turn back this clock. We can only work with the situation as it is. As a start, here's what we can do: Stop our own violence. Call together a council of Arab nations to help us rebuild the country. And change our policies toward Palestine, bringing some pressure to bear on Israel to negotiate with the Palestinians. This has to happen, and soon.

**Kullander:** It's hard to imagine the Democratic majority in Congress getting us out of Iraq, since most of them voted for the war to begin with.

**Chittister:** I was not happy about that. I know the Democrats in Congress were outvoted on the war, but they could have spoken against it. They should have been out in the streets with placards. They should have gone home to small towns across the nation and expressed their deep opposition to what was happening. Instead they repeated that silly old saw "We have to get behind the president in a time of war." We do not elect a Congress to "get behind the president." We elect a Congress to get behind the Constitution. I know of no other period in the history of this country when Congress abdicated its role the way it has over the last six years. Before George W. Bush was elected, I would have argued that something like this couldn't happen in American politics. But it has happened: we have dismantled the checks-and-balances system.

**Kullander:** Why do you think the Democrats in Congress capitulated?

**Chittister:** I believe you'll find corporate greed and political lobbyists at the bottom of it. I think there was a great desire to move into Iraq to control it. Why? First, we wanted to

make sure that Iraq's oil did not go anywhere we didn't want it to go, even if we weren't going to take it all. Second, we wanted a military foothold in the region so our troops could reach all points in the Arab world at any given moment.

I remember flying over South Africa years ago. I had never seen cities laid out in such an orderly fashion. They are absolutely perfect grids. Not a single bend in the road. I was traveling with some South Africans at the time, and I turned to them and said I'd been led to believe that theirs was a poor country — how could they build roads like these? And they said to me that the government had built the roads so that troops could get to the townships quickly in the event of an uprising.

So here we are with big bases in the Middle East now, from which fighter planes and supply planes can take off in an instant and within half an hour reach any country in that part of the world. Do you think that doesn't make Arab countries nervous, given what they've seen happen to Iraq?

**Kullander:** When you're out in the world speaking — and you speak a lot — are you speaking for yourself, or are you speaking for the Catholic Church?

**Chittister:** I'm not speaking for the Church, but I am informed by the Catholic vision of the world. I am speaking in concert with what the Church has said in all eras. The papal documents on social issues for the last hundred-plus years are exemplars of social concern.

Granted, from around the fourth century through the late Middle Ages, Europe was a theocracy, and the Church committed all the sins that go with absolute religious rule. It lost sight of itself as a religion and became an oppressor. Everybody knows the basic history of the Crusades and the Inquisition. It is the history of a church that grew too wealthy and powerful and was corrupted by politics.

At the same time, the Catholic religious orders offered a parallel social system that stood with the poorest of the poor. The Benedictine order opened the first toll roads in the history of the Western world, and the money collected from them was used to help the poor, who were being driven off the land with the rise of nations and the fall of feudalism. The Benedictines also opened the first hospitality houses for travelers. The common method of devotion at that time was making pilgrimages from one shrine to another, but pilgrims were being mugged on the roads. So Benedictine communities took the pilgrims in and kept them safe. The pride of the Benedictines was that you could get from one Benedictine monastery to the next in a day's travel.

To be sure, the Catholic Church has a schizophrenic history. But its social teachings have always been clear, even when its actions were reprehensible.

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