

An Open Letter to Catholic Religious Women

Read by Rev. Dr. Frances Taylor Gench at the

Rally in Solidarity with Catholic Sisters

May 29, 2012, Washington, DC

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May 1, 2012

Dear Sisters,

We write to you as sisters in faith who may not express our vocation in the same particular community of faith, but who share much in common—as believers, as advocates, and as peacemakers. We write in a spirit of solidarity and as witnesses to the authenticity of your ministries, particularly the Leadership Conference of Women Religious, in a time when the integrity of your witness has been questioned by Catholic leadership.

While we are not all from the same particular Christian community, we, as women, share a common story. The struggle over women's authority is an age old question for Christians. Christian churches have long been ambivalent about us. Women's roles have been embraced in private, not public forums. Women leaders are affirmed as long as they are seen, but not heard (at least not too much). For centuries, women have been seen as prophets, dreamed new realities, but have been dismissed too often and affirmed only when their visions didn't contradict the beliefs held by those in positions of power. We are aware that even when churches will ordain us to serve in positions of leadership, we are often not trusted to identify the most urgent needs our congregations should address or to design the shape of our own ministries.

The plight of the powerless is familiar to the women of the church. We, however, do not believe that authorities in any church should take away women's power to determine for ourselves a vision for our ministries and vocations. Many, many women have raised similar questions as those raised by the Leadership Conference of Women Religious. Is it God's design for there to be an exclusively male priesthood? Are not economic justice and access to health care not only issues in greatest need of being addressed in our society today, but also concerns at the core of Catholic faith as well as the good news of the gospel message? What we see in this struggle is not a lack of our sisters' integrity and authentic witness to Christian faith, but a struggle that has been too familiar for all women of faith—a struggle over authority and who should have the power to define true faith.

Women in the churches have dedicated their lives to serving the needs of people in the world for centuries. Today, our Catholic sisters live in community and serve the church thoughtfully and creatively through countless acts of love, hospitality, and social advocacy. Our Catholic sisters are often strong advocates for people living in poverty, people who are in prison, people who lack access to affordable health care, people who are unable to access clean water, people who are sick, and people who have been victimized by the violence of others. Their service and advocacy is similar to that of so many of us who because of own experiences as women find it critical to place the needs of people who are impoverished, cast aside, and powerless at the focal point of our own ministries.

We have all been challenged by the wisdom of learned Catholic sisters who are scholars teaching in college, university, seminary, and church classrooms. Our sisters have taught us to engage our imaginations about the Christian tradition which we share. We are particularly thankful for the wisdom of Sister Elizabeth Johnson and Sister Joan Chittister. Our sisters have often carried the stories of many, many women and the wounds of the disenfranchised in their prayers and into their writing.

Religious women have long recognized the need to care for the whole human person. There are many faithful sisters who help us to remember the humanity of people who are shut away in prison or deemed untouchable. There are many faithful sisters who refuse to accept the legitimacy of an economic system that allows the few to become fabulously wealthy while the many remain submerged in perpetual want and poverty. Some of the names of our sisters who have become known for their advocacy are easily recognized—Sister Helen Prejean, Sister Jeannine Gramick, and Mother Teresa come to mind. We are also well aware that the names of many of our sisters in faith and members of Catholic communities of religious women are not etched in our memories. And, yet our sisters live authentic lives of faith and witness to our common belief that God is still creating a vision for a new heaven and a new earth.

Where would any of our churches be without women leaders? Where would the Catholic Church be without women's religious communities? How will the social witness of the larger church on issues of poverty and economic justice be hindered by not honoring the authority of these women of faith?

We join hands with you, our sisters. We are grateful for your willingness to take risks to engage in advocacy and peacemaking. We stand with you in solidarity and will continue to walk with you as witnesses to our common struggles and our common faith on this journey.

In the peace and steadfast love of Christ,

Advocacy Committee for Women's Concerns of the Presbyterian Church USA (ACWC)

The Ad Hoc Group on Racism, Sexism, and Classism (RSAC)

Anglican Women's Empowerment

Association of Roman Catholic Women Priests

Auburn Theological Seminary, New York, New York

Baptist Women in Ministry

Blessed John XXIII Faith Community, Barrington, Illinois

Catherine of Siena Virtual College

Church Women United

The Feminist Sexual Ethics Project, Brandeis University

Jeff Street Baptist Community at Liberty, Louisville, Kentucky

Lutheran Women in Theological and Religious Studies

Metropolitan Community Church, San Francisco, California

The Namaste Community of East Bay of San Francisco

New Visions Faith Community, Mt. Prospect, Illinois

Pacific, Asian, and North American Asian Women in Theology and Ministry

Presbyterian Women in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A), Inc.

Southeastern Pennsylvania Women's Ordination Conference

Sophia Inclusive Catholic Community in Sussex County New Jersey

Sophia in Trinity: A Roman Catholic Community of Celebrants, San Francisco, California

Starr King School for the Ministry, Berkeley, California

Woman Spirit Ireland

Women's Center at Louisville Seminary, Louisville, Kentucky

Women of the Advisory Committee on Social Witness Policy, PC(USA)
Women Faculty of Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary, Austin, Texas
Women of Chicago Theological Seminary, Chicago, Illinois
Women Faculty of the Department of Religion, Dominican University of California
Women Faculty of Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary, Louisville, Kentucky
Women Faculty of Meadville Lombard Theological School (Unitarian Universalist) Chicago, Illinois.
Women Faculty at Union Presbyterian Seminary, Richmond, Virginia
Women Faculty at Vanderbilt Divinity School, Nashville, Tennessee
Women of the Social Ethics Network of the PCUSA
Women's Alliance for Theology, Ethics, and Ritual (WATER)
Women Theologians (Protestant and Roman Catholic) from the "Workgroup for Constructive Theology"

Many individuals, women and men, also expressed their willingness to endorse this letter. The endorsements of the communities, groups, and organizations were gathered through women's networks and by women's groups and organizations over a period of about five days.