
Spring 2019

TO OBEY, OR NOT TO OBEY: THAT IS THE QUESTION AN EXPLORATION INTO THE WAY SR. JOAN CHITTISTER O.S.B. AND HER BENEDICTINE COMMUNITY CRITICALLY ENGAGE TEACHING OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH RATHER THAN BLINDLY OBEYING

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Recommended Citation

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TO OBEY, OR NOT TO OBEY: THAT IS THE QUESTION
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CATHOLIC CHURCH RATHER THAN BLINDLY OBEYING

An Essay Submitted to
The Office of Graduate Studies
College of Arts and Sciences
John Carroll University
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of
Master of Arts

By
Sean Michael Cahill
2019

The essay of Sean Michael Cahill is hereby accepted.

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Date

That has been my experience that my years with LCWR have confronted me with most...a sense that I stand like a fly on a pin-head someplace, talking what are important questions to us and being observed from a superior position by someone with a fly-swatter who does not necessarily value what I'm saying or what I am.

Joan Chittister, O.S.B.¹

In 2012, the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF) released their "Doctrinal Assessment of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious."² The document thanks women religious for their work in schools, hospitals, and institutions that support the poor—while at the same time accusing them of promoting doctrinal problems and causing a loss to the "constant and lively sense of the Church" among women religious. If we look at the "Doctrinal Assessment" as a tool the Vatican used to wield their power over the Leadership Conference of Women Religious (LCWR), it seems fair to ask what responses can be given by the Leadership Conference as they attempt to witness to their own "sense of the faith" (*sensus fidei*). In order to understand how the LCWR can maintain their position within the church, despite disagreement, we

¹ Joshua J. McElwee, "LCWR past presidents reflect on Vatican mandate," National Catholic Reporter, <https://www.ncronline.org/news/vatican/lcwr-past-presidents-reflect-vatican-mandate> accessed February 4th 2019.

² See Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, "The Doctrinal Assessment of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious," http://www.usccb.org/upload/doctrinal_assessment_leadership_conference_women_religious.pdf, accessed March 1, 2019. More information, including mission statement, resources, and current leadership of the LCWR can be found on their website: <https://lcwr.org/> accessed March 1, 2019.

first look at the ways in which the CDF both wields power and understands obedience. Second, we turn to the ways in which Sister Joan Chittister, O.S.B., and her Benedictine Order understand obedience and how they see themselves remaining in union with the church while dissenting from certain church teaching. Third, we look more closely at Chittister in her capacity as the former president of the LCWR and former prioress of the Benedictine Sisters of Erie, Pennsylvania, for a case study to explore her more expansive understanding of obedience—an understanding quite different from the CDF’s understanding of what it means to be faithful. This exploration reveals Chittister’s movement away from a blind obedience toward a critical and communal exercise of obedience, a move that shows not only Chittister’s broader understanding of obedience but also her invitation that others might do the same.

The Power and Authority of the Magisterium: Obedience is Clear

Francis Sullivan offers extensive scholarship on this topic as he systematically presents the nature and function of the church’s teaching office, the magisterium.³ Sullivan explains that the magisterium derives its authority from the biblical and historical tradition as interpreted by each generation of believers. Sullivan explains that the church has a divine assurance of not only its existence, but also its fidelity to Christ and his Gospel until the end of time.⁴ This confidence in the church’s fidelity to Christ

³ Francis A. Sullivan, S.J., *Magisterium: Teaching Authority in the Catholic Church* (Ramsey, NJ: Paulist Press, 1983), 52.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 4.

and his Gospel was reiterated in the Second Vatican Council's Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (*Lumen Gentium*).

Moving forward through trial and tribulation, the Church is strengthened by the power of God's grace, which was promised to her by the Lord, so that in the weakness of the flesh she may not waver from perfect fidelity, but remain a bride worthy of her Lord, and moved by the Holy Spirit may never cease to renew herself, until through the Cross she arrives at the light which knows no setting.⁵

The idea that the church moves forward and does not waver from perfect fidelity, Sullivan explains, is lived out by the church in humble faith in the power of God's grace and the abiding assistance of the Holy Spirit. It seems clear that if Christians believe that the church is free from the ability to stray from perfection it is because of the intervention of the Holy Spirit. The same argument is used to explain how imperfect people could write down the perfect Word of God. It must be noted, however, that while *Lumen Gentium* supposes fidelity, it also states that the church "already on this earth is signed with a sanctity which is real although imperfect."⁶ If the church maintains a holiness that, while real, is nevertheless marred by imperfection and the errors of human beings, how can we be assured of the church's fidelity to the gospel? Before answering that question, which Sullivan does brilliantly through a few case studies, one of his contemporaries, and

⁵ Vatican Council II, *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church: Lumen Gentium* (Boston: St. Paul Editions, 1965), 9.

⁶ Ibid., 48.

fellow Jesuit, Ladislav Orsy, offers more context for the authority of the magisterium and the role it plays as a teacher and a learner.

Orsy attacks the distinction between the teaching church, which includes the pope and the other bishops, and the learning church, which would be everyone else. Orsy argues that we cannot and should not view the relationship between the magisterium and the rest of the church as a one-way street where the magisterium teaches and everyone else learns. Rather, learning and teaching happens by *both* sides. This is not to say that Orsy argues that the magisterium cannot be considered a “qualified” teacher, he does not. He does say that, even though the magisterium is a qualified teacher which cannot err in matters essential to the faith, it is still possible for individuals to dissent from official church teaching. But how?

Orsy explains that within the community of the church there is the community of bishops, who, when in communion with each other, have a power “in the spirit” to proclaim the authentic word of God.⁷ This belief, which Christians have held since very early on, was reaffirmed by the Second Vatican Council: “In matters of faith and morals, the bishops speak in the name of Christ and the faithful are to accept their teaching and adhere to it with a religious assent. This religious submission of mind and will must be shown in a special way to the authentic magisterium of the Roman Pontiff.”⁸ It is this submission of mind and will that concerns me, because *Lumen Gentium* seems to say that

⁷ Ladislav Orsy, S.J., *The Church: Learning and Teaching* (Wilmington, DE: Michael Glazier, 1987), 80.

⁸ Vatican Council II, *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church*, 25.

we must adhere to the teaching of the bishops without question or pause. It does not seem to me that there is any room for questioning the authority on this one. However, Orsy provides a way out of this dilemma by explaining the various ways in which the word *obsequium* is used in the conciliar documents.

Orsy asserts that the Second Vatican Council is unparalleled not only in what was said at the council but also in the way in which it was said.⁹ Pope John XXIII hopes that the Second Vatican Council would be a pastoral council, bringing awareness, the church's awareness of itself through renewal and dialogue. James Sweeney, a contemporary American Catholic theologian, shines a light on the type of language that comes about because of the pastoral nature of the council. In doing so, Sweeney indicates how the ideal type of authority-governance could serve as a criterion for judging the functioning of authority in religious life today.

Sweeney does a little reworking of language when he says we can change "authority" (which in the pre-Vatican II era meant "command") to *service* and "obedience" (which before Vatican II was "blind") to *availability*. In this context, he talks about discernment. For Sweeney, these three focal points ought to be part of the day-to-day actions of the faithful in their continual efforts to read the signs of the times.¹⁰ One might see Sweeney's suggestion as a step in the right direction for the post-conciliar church, but I do not agree. It seems to me that changing a few words around and claiming

⁹ Orsy, *The Church: Learning and Teaching*, 86.

¹⁰ James Sweeney, "The Experience of Religious Orders," in *Authority in the Roman Catholic Church: Theory and Practice*, ed. Bernard Hoose (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2002), 172.

progress is not enough. We can say that women can be a “service” to the church through their “availability”—their “discerning” the will of God is to listen to church teaching and then go out and spread the love that that teaching is meant to encourage. However, nowhere in that equation do we see the advancement of a position that might be contrary to the Catholic Church’s teachings. In this post-conciliar church there has to be more focus on the possibility that the faithful might disagree with official teaching. They need the ability to express their disapproval in a cogent fashion while still being in communion with the church.

The ambiguities in church documents could be an example of John Henry Newman’s theory on the development of doctrine.¹¹ In essence, Newman explains that enlightenment will not come only from logical deductions; rather, the “supernatural sense of faith” of a community will propel the teachings forward. It is in that spirit that Orsy’s explanation of *obsequium* advances. When Vatican II used the word *obsequium*, the council participants understood it in a number of different ways. The literal translation, some argue, is “submission.” If that is the case, the council would appear to be arguing that believers must be submissive to the teaching. That interpretation, however, ignores the ways in which the council worked, and the very different ways in which the word *obsequium* worked in the council discussions. Orsy points out how, for example, different qualifiers used in different contexts imply different meanings of the word. Two such usages are significant: *obsequium fidei*, which Orsay interprets as “one

¹¹ John Henry Newman, *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989, orig. 1845).

with the believing church: holding firm to doctrine,” and *obsequium religiosum*, which he translates, “one with the searching church, working for clarification.”¹²

The first classification, *obsequium fidei*, seems to make the most sense if we think of the faithful being submissive to faith, without questioning the hierarchy or the decisions that are made. It’s the second classification, *obsequium religiosum*, that connects to the LCWR and their engaging certain church teachings critically, rather than blindly, submissively, following them. For instance, the LCWR chose to raise critical questions when they invited speakers to events who were proponents of women’s ordination to the priesthood. Orsy says that there is room for this type of dissent, but too often dissent is viewed completely negatively. When he quotes the Oxford English Dictionary he points out that there is nothing positive with the word “dissent”; rather, it is a word that means to disagree completely, to sever ties completely, with no room for a middle ground. This would not be an appropriate definition, then, for the LCWR. When the LCWR invites women to speak about women’s ordination they are not looking to separate from the church; quite the opposite, they are looking to expand the church, invite more people in, revitalize and grow the institution. So there has to be another angle for what it means to dissent from the teachings of the magisterium.

Rick Gaillardetz builds on the work of Orsy as he lays out different levels of church teaching: (1) dogma, (2) definitive doctrine, (3) authoritative doctrine, and (4) provisional applications of church doctrine, church discipline and prudential

¹² Orsy, *The Church: Learning and Teaching*, 89.

admonitions.¹³ Each of these four levels have responses that the church demands of faithful believers. These responses are, respectively: (1) assent of faith in which the believer makes an act of faith, trusting that this teaching is revealed by God; (2) firm acceptance, in which the believer “accepts and holds” the teachings to be true; (3) a religious docility (*obsequium*) of will and intellect, in which the believer strives to assimilate a teaching of the church into their religious stance, while recognizing the remote possibility of church error; and finally (4) the conscientious obedience, in which the believer obeys (the spirit of) any church law or disciplinary action which does not lead to sin, even when questioning the ultimate value or wisdom of the law or action.¹⁴

Gaillardetz’s level of teaching and the respective responses that the church demands of believers is a helpful guide as the faithful look to respond appropriately to different teachings of the church; however, the question becomes: What is an appropriate response to a particular issue if the Church does not give explicit classification to the teachings promulgated? For instance, if the Catholic Church says that women may not enter into Holy Orders, is that teaching dogma, definitive doctrine, or authoritative doctrine? The church might argue the question falls into definitive doctrine but it seems to me there is nothing to keep the Benedictine Order from legitimately believing authoritative doctrine is a more appropriate home, which opens up the possibility, remote that it may be, that there is error in this teaching. While I am not writing to argue that the

¹³ Richard R. Gaillardetz, *By What Authority? A Primer on Scripture, the Magisterium, and the Sense of the Faithful* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2003), 126.

¹⁴ Gaillardetz, *By What Authority?*, 126.

ordination of women belongs in one classification over another, I am arguing that just as there are levels of teaching offered by the magisterium, so too are there different levels of obedience held by the faithful believers. We should take a moment to unpack the appropriate responses to a few of the levels before we get to the ways in which Chittister herself understands obedience.

The two levels of church teaching that seem most likely to be challenged by the faithful believer are definitive doctrine and authoritative doctrine. First, Gaillardetz explains that definitive doctrine, which demands the believer accept and hold teachings to be true, is not divinely revealed; rather, it is necessary to safeguard and expound revelation.¹⁵ If a believer chooses not to believe in a particular definitive doctrine, that person is not engaging in heresy, as long as he or she holds a firm desire to be in union with the Church and engages in meaningful dialogue on this question. It is certainly possible that the believer is wrong in their dissent, but there should be room for these questions to be raised.

The level that follows definitive doctrine is authoritative doctrine, and the type of response demanded here differs because, in the case of authoritative doctrine, there is a remote possibility of church error. Nonetheless, the believer is still expected to strive to assimilate such teaching into their religious stance. When someone is an *expert authority* on a subject it seems that there would be little room for questions, for the authority on a subject is likely to know exactly what the answer must be on any question that is posed.

¹⁵ Gaillardetz, *By What Authority?*, 123.

By analogy, in the case of authoritative doctrine, the church does not claim to be such an expert authority, especially when addressing moral questions that the universal church faces. When the church makes its position known on a given moral question, that teaching likely falls into this third category and the faithful observer is asked to follow that decision with “a religious docility (*obsequium*) of the will and intellect” to the teaching within this category.¹⁶

Gaillardetz’s systematic approach on how to deal with this level of church teaching is inspiring and is likely the very type of examination that Chittister and so many other faithful dissenters go through. His three step process includes, first, the religiously docile attitude toward a problematic church teaching includes a willingness to engage in further study of the issue, with a recognition that one may lack the catechetical foundation or some other lack of educational understanding of the issue. Second, the person engages in an examination of conscience if the teaching involves matters of morality. This examination is a tool where a believer can take a step back and ask difficult questions in order to understand if the moral teachings are really weighing on their heart in a way that is, in a sense, justifiable. Third, the believer questions whether or not the teaching in question is problematic because he takes issue with the very fact that there is a church authority. This third step would be problematic on a host of different levels because the moment the faithful believer decides that there should be no central church authority, I would argue, is the moment the faithful believer is not a member of

¹⁶ Vatican Council II, *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church*, 25.

the universal church. If the church has no authority, the church immediately has no connection with divine revelation and ceases to be.

The process Gaillardetz offers is an arduous one, which is good. It seems to me that if faithful believers do not engage in a rigorous examination of church teaching before they choose to dissent, then their arguments are built in the same way that the houses on sand are built. When difficult questions are posed the arguments will be washed out to sea. The dissent that is offered by Joan Chittister is built on solid ground, and disobedience for her is firmly rooted in discernment, understanding the Word of God, and bolstered by her Benedictine Order and the spirituality found within it.

Chittister and Obedience

Religious women and men take vows as they enter their particular orders and continue to take vows as they progress on their spiritual journey. Poverty, chastity, and obedience are the three vows made by Benedictine community members as they enter their religious life. Chittister took a vow pledging obedience throughout her religious life. Because she took this vow of obedience, the question becomes: How can she choose to dissent with the teachings of the Catholic Church? The answer is found in the depths of the Benedictine Rule and in the charism of the Order. In a presentation she gave in 2001 at the National Catholic Educational Association convention, Chittister explained that, “Vision is the ability to realize that the truth is always larger than the partial present.”¹⁷ Vision is critical in knowing that the truth in any given situation is not necessarily what it

¹⁷ Joan Chittister, “Sr. Joan Chittister, O.S.B.: An Uncommon Search for the Common Good”, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v1vbY7nBM2A>, accessed on April 1, 2019.

most clear in the moment; rather, having vision, which is exactly what the Benedictine Order has, allows community members to see the larger picture of truth in a particular teaching. In their community, we see the Benedictines, and their leadership, acting as one as they obey or choose to faithfully disobey a particular teaching.

When the Benedictine sisters faithfully consider a particular stance, praying over their decision, and deciding to dissent, this is the obedience that has been practiced by the Benedictines for centuries. The Benedictine nuns in Erie, Pennsylvania, were engaged in the type of discernment that James Sweeney describes as post-Vatican II. Sweeney explains that it is important to understand how obedience has evolved in order to understand how it is understood today. In the wake of the atrocities of WWII, where so many said they were “just following orders,” we see courts (in their own right an authority figure) saying that individuals could not morally hide behind authority, nor could they disown their personal responsibility.¹⁸ Just because an authority, legitimate or illegitimate, demands something does not mean that subordinates must follow, there must be an active sense of discerning what is truly right. This is part of the evolution of obedience, instead of blindly following, taking a critical approach to what is said and acting accordingly. Seeing obedience as an opportunity for submission on the part of the person obeying is not new. Jesus’ agony in the garden with his, “not my will but thine be done” is perhaps the best example. Whether or not there was a sense of critical

¹⁸ Sweeney, “The Experience of Religious Orders,” 172.

questioning and then choosing to submit can be debated but following God's will and not his own can be seen as an example of how obedience has been handled.

While obedience has taken the form of complete submission to a higher authority, Sweeney explains that it looks different today.¹⁹ There is still a sense of following God's will, as Jesus did during his passion, but religious orders today obey their foundational "rule" in ways that allow for more communal discernment of the will of God. The Benedictines do this with their rule just as the Jesuits and other religious communities follow their own rule, constitution, or exercises. Chittister, as she remains faithful to her vow of obedience, explains that she is, "ready to serve at all times, but [that she is] independent and critical of every structure that makes an uncritical claim upon [obedience]."²⁰ This critical approach falls directly in line with Sweeney's description of how obedience is viewed today within the charism of deeply reflective orders like the Benedictines. As Chittister closely examines the teaching of the church she is engaged in something more than what Sweeney calls a simplistic theology. The simplistic theology is one in which there is no questioning, there is simply following. Furthermore, Sweeney describes the simplistic theology as one where the superior in a given order would make a demand and the inferior member would obey, even if the superior was wrong. Following this demand of blind obedience, it was trusted that God would sort out the superior at some point. Chittister's Benedictine community would certainly be more in line with this

¹⁹ Ibid., 171.

²⁰ Joan Chittister, O.S.B., *The Fire in these Ashes. A Spirituality of Contemporary Religious Life* (Kansas City, Sheed & Ward, 1995), 129.

current trajectory of obedience, rather than the simplistic theology held by many prior to Vatican II.

Prayer is also a critical part of the Benedictine Order and is an aspect of their religious life that is critical to what it means to be obedient and listen with the ears of the heart. The *Rule of Saint Benedict* instructs the monastic community to keep prayer brief and asks monastics to leave the chapel quietly so that anyone who wants to stay longer may continue to pray without interruption. Chittister knows the rules and she knows the prayer forms and the purpose of prayer, but the act of *becoming prayer* is something that cannot be taught, it must be lived. Once, when she was on a flight from Manila to Tokyo, the captain got on the loudspeaker saying that the landing gear was not working and the plane would have to be crash landed. After the ordeal, Chittister was asked if she prayed. She replied that she did not pray, she *became* prayer.²¹ Becoming prayer is an art that is beyond praying, it comes from a lifetime of working at the act of prayer until it is finally internalized and lived. It is this act of becoming prayer that brings the theory of obedience to life, for just as practicing prayer allows a Benedictine to become prayer, so too, does practicing obedience within a community help the Benedictines embody obedience, obedience to their “sense of the faith” (*sensus fidei*). The LCWR, Chittister, and the Benedictine community respond to the magisterium not as women who are dissenting just to be difficult; rather, they are women who have become the very prayers that they have prayed, they have become the very words of the Bible that they have read,

²¹ Joan Chittister O.S.B., *Joan Chittister: Essential Writing* (New York: Orbis Books, 2014), 89.

they have become the very obedience that their vow demands—always in faithful service to the church and its people.

If we take internalized prayer as an example for the transformed life which then becomes a living example of prayer, we can make the comparison to other aspects of Chittister's life. Just as she has worked to become living prayer she has worked to become a living example of equality. Just as we all can work to become living prayer, so we all can work to become living examples of justice.

Chittister provides a model for how to legitimately dissent from certain authoritative doctrine, such as current church teaching on the ordination of women. John Coleman names different types of authority (classifications which were first articulated by Max Weber) that help to illustrate the nature of Chittister's work. The first is traditional authority. Coleman explains traditional authority in a particularly pejorative way, saying that it is rooted in the precedents of the past and has little ability to change.²² At first this does not seem like it would describe the progressive Chittister, but we must remember that as the Prioress for the Erie Benedictine Sisters, she held a position that is thoroughly traditional, established by past precedents and rooted in history. However, the very traditional position that Chittister held was brought into the new age as she practiced the second type of authority Coleman describes, charismatic authority.

Anyone who has seen Sister Joan Chittister speak, or read her work, knows that she is incredibly charismatic. There are certainly other adjectives that people would use

²² John A. Coleman, "Authority, Power, Leadership: Sociological Understandings," *New Theology Review* 10.3 (1997): 35.

to describe her, many of them not quite as flattering as charismatic, but her speaking skills are most certainly inspiring. Coleman expounds on Weber's understanding of charismatic authority, saying that it, "rests on the wisdom or, even, the sacred gifts of an extraordinary individual and [their] followers. The charismatic leader breaks with tradition: 'You heard it said of old, but *I* say unto you.'"²³ This type of authority is not contingent on the governed abdicating their autonomy; rather, the governed put their trust in a charismatic leader whose unusual gifts are seen as compelling and self-justifying. In this sense, as Coleman explains, charismatic authority is non-rational, which does not mean irrational. While this type of leadership might make those in power nervous, we must realize that, in the case of the Benedictine Order, charismatic authority is coupled with prayer, discernment, and the legitimate purpose of growing the mission of the Order. This includes working with the poor, education, care for the world, and constant prayer. While charismatic authority can certainly be used for ill, in the hands of Sister Joan Chittister, it is used to bring awareness, unity, and understanding among God's faithful.

Speaking on Meet the Press in 2006, Chittiser shared a story that illustrates her long and deep commitment to questioning authority. When she was a seven-year-old grammar student, Joan's teacher explained that Protestants would not go to heaven when they died. Chittister remembers being mortified because her father was Protestant. When she went home and told her mother, her mom asked if Joan believed her teacher. Joan's response was, "Sister is wrong." Joan's mother asked her why she thought her teacher

²³ Coleman, "Authority, Power, Leadership," 35.

would say something like that if it was wrong. Joan's response, "Because she doesn't know daddy." From the mouth of a very young Chittister we see her challenging an authority figure who happened to be a nun. We see now that the nun was obviously wrong but if we could go back in time, we would see a classroom where the teacher would never be questioned and the students would always obey, because the teacher's word was truth. Chittister learned a valuable lesson that day; obedience is important, certainly, but it does not supersede the need to think and question critically.

As a Benedictine nun, Chittister continues to practice obedience in a fundamentally Benedictine way: in community. Her community follows a rule that, "describes spiritual doctrines and a rhythm of daily life to embody Christian values in practice in community."²⁴ It is important to note that the community does not look at the rule as a set of demands; rather, it serves as a set of guidelines. When the rule was written in the sixth century, rule (*regla*) meant "guide" or "guideline." These guidelines offer a structure that keeps the community in union with those who went before them and those who will undoubtedly follow. The rule provides a basis for the obedience that Chittister and her community members follow. Obedience for Chittister has changed drastically during her time with the Benedictine community. Chittister explains that obedience started off as a militaristic virtue rather than a Christian value, but has thankfully opened up to the latter during her more than fifty years as a Benedictine. On the more militaristic,

²⁴ Krista Tippett, "Sister Joan Chittister: Obedience and Action", On Being, <https://onbeing.org/programs/sister-joan-chittister-obedience-and-action/> accessed February 23, 2019.

or pejorative outlook of obedience, Chittister said that, “there was a tremendous emphasis on conformity. That’s the life that had been developed as a result of, for instance, the industrial age. And you’ve come to understand assembly lines. When you depersonalize the human being for the sake of the product.”²⁵ The product that we are dealing with here would be the Church itself, and the magisterium looking to keep sacred the laws and teachings to be consumed by the church faithful.

On the contrary, for Chittister obedience must not look anything like a militaristic order coming from a ruler on high. Chittister explains that the military meaning of obedience had, whether anyone realized it or not, began to consume both the faithful and church authority following WWII. It wasn’t until after WW II, when education itself became an option for most women, that we see a shift from military conformity to a sensitivity to the impulses of grace in our lives. The word “obedience” comes from the Latin word *oboedire*, “to listen.” And the first word of the Rule of Benedict is “Listen, my children, to the precepts of your teacher.” Listen to them, learn from them. Not “Jump.” “How high?”²⁶

Chittister and the Vatican

The Vatican had tried to silence Chittister and the LCWR in 2001, but when that did not work they tried other ways to achieve their goal of maintaining obedience. In 2012, the Vatican appointed Archbishop Peter Sartain of Seattle, Washington, to oversee the LCWR. The Vatican charged him with revising LCWR statutes, reviewing LCWR

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

plans and programs, creating new programs for the organization; reviewing and offering guidance on the application of liturgical texts; and reviewing LCWR's affiliations with other organizations, citing specifically NETWORK and the Resource Center for Religious Institutes.

Chittister, upon hearing the news of the appointment, responded that it was "actually immoral." She said:

Within the canonical framework, there is only one way I can see to deal with this, they would have to disband canonically and regroup as an unofficial interest group. That would be the only way to maintain growth and nourish their congregational charisms and the charism of the LCWR, which is to help religious communities assess the signs of the time. If everything you do has to be approved by somebody outside, then you're giving your charism away, and you're certainly demeaning the ability of women to make distinctions.²⁷

Chittister advocated for whatever means were necessary to ensure that a discussion continued to take place. For years the discussion of certain topics, including women's ordination, were banned and anyone found talking about the topics could face reprimand or ecclesiastical penalty. Chittister's response to the possibility of censure or excommunication for talking about issues like women's ordination is indicative of the activist she is. Chittister explained that the church is a slow-moving organization, yet she

²⁷ Francis DeBernardo, "Sister Joan Chittister & Sister Simone Campbell Respond to Vatican Action Against U.S. Nuns," <https://www.newwaysministry.org/2012/04/19/sister-joan-chittister-sister-simone-campbell-respond-to-vatican-action-against-u-s-nuns/> accessed November 30, 2018.

asked, “How many women’s voices will it take before we honor the woman’s question? I don’t know. But I am conscious, and therefore I am responsible.”²⁸ She knows that discussion, questions, dialogue, and debate are the tools that will lead to a more obedient church.

Chittister, for years, has been told obedience is required of her by the church in hopes that she might be silenced. The most notable occasion of this attempt to suppress her came in 2001 when Chittister was invited to give a talk in Dublin, Ireland, at a conference on the ordination of women. The conference was promoted by the LCWR, the European organization Women’s Ordination Worldwide, the American organization Women’s Ordination Conference, and the international movement We Are Church, among others, and had around 90 Roman Catholic nuns present.²⁹ When the Vatican learned that there would be nuns going to this conference an order went out to the many superiors of their communities ordering that the superiors forbid anyone from attending. Some superiors obeyed while others did not.

When the prioress of the Benedictines, Sr. Christine Vladimiroff, received a letter from the Vatican that ordered her to forbid Chittister from attending, she asked for a meeting in Rome. She went with others, and at the meeting was told to “encourage” Chittister not to attend the conference. Vladimiroff went back to her community, gathered all of the Benedictine Sisters in Erie together to discuss the Vatican’s request and would

²⁸ Tippet, “Sister Joan Chittister: Obedience and Action.”

²⁹ Atila Sinke Guimarães, “Bird’s Eye View of the News,” <https://www.traditioninaction.org/bev/012bev08-31-2001.htm> accessed November 25, 2018.

eventually send the signatures of every nun in the Erie Benedictine community, except one, to the Vatican giving Chittister their blessing not only to attend the conference, but also to speak at it. This, I argue, is not an act of defiance; rather, this is an act of listening to the Benedictine community and, though it, the voice of God. This was an act of obedience, with the sisters listening with the ears of their hearts, something that Christ and the early prophets would have understood all too well.³⁰ This discernment process by the Benedictine community is the type of dialogue, discussion, and debate for which Chittister is advocating in all walks of life. This was the process for her discernment on the work of the LCWR when the Vatican held their assessment. It is this discernment that Gaillardetz is talking about when he gives the ways in which we can dissent.

If we look to Gaillardetz one more time and put this scenario in his framework, we can see why Chittister has been so effective in her governance and handling of the Vatican. Because Chittister was giving her talk on women's ordination, we will use that issues as an example for engaging Gaillardetz's framework. First, although it is disputed, a number of theologians conclude that the church's prohibition against the ordination of women falls into the category of authoritative doctrine, which means that the response of the believer includes recognizing the remote possibility of church error. If this is the case, how else would believers get to the bottom of the teaching and the possibility of church error unless discussion takes place, unless questions are asked? It would not be possible. So for this stage, Chittister talking about the role women play in the church (including the

³⁰ Joan Chittister. O.S.B., *Women, Ministry and the Catholic Church* (Ramsey, NJ: Paulist Press, 1983), 115.

question of ordination) would be appropriate; she is practicing obedience and dissenting in a legitimate manner. However, if this topic falls into the second category, definitive doctrine, there might be a stronger argument against Chittister. On this question, Gaillardetz punts by saying that, yes, the believer must accept and hold the teachings to be true, but there are no grounds to think that denying these teachings means that a believer is engaging in heresy as we currently understand the term.

My response is that if Chittister responds to the Vatican by offering an opportunity to share views and to share her Catholic faith at the same time, why is the Vatican afraid? Would it not make more sense for the Vatican simply to say that she can share her views, and if they are so off base then listeners should be able to see that for themselves and disregard her talk? It seems to me that is the role of conversation and debate. Whether we put the topic of women's ordination into the second or third category, the fact that Chittister is anxious to share her deeply held views should not garner an assessment, the employ of an overseer, censure, or any other recourse that the Vatican chooses. Rather, her willingness to share her views should be met with skepticism, questions, and either acceptance or rejection on the part of faithful listeners. I imagine Chittister would accept a position that is different from her own, but I doubt that she would accept ridiculous reasons based on centuries-old ideas about the inferior nature of women. When an interviewer said to Chittister that many believed only men could be priests because Jesus was a man and his disciples were all men, her response was perfect. Chittister said, in effect: Well, Jesus was also a Jew, and I don't know any Catholic priests who are Jewish. Two sides of the discussion are needed to determine faithfully the

role of women in the church. At the end of that discussion, we may all decide that the church ought to maintain its traditional prohibition. But we should agree based on good reasons, not bad reasons.³¹

The church cannot afford to offer fifth-century responses to twenty-first century questions. If we continue to see the types of reasons offered by the Vatican, then young women growing up in the Church today will find it to be one of the few institutions that, as a matter of principle and policy, excludes them from positions of leadership and decision making. Chittister is interested in obedience, she took a vow to show that fact; however, she knows that when church teachings are such that people are oppressed, looked down upon, considered less than, told they need to have a superior to watch their every word, movement, and speech, or made to suffer through a litigious assessment, then a blind obedience will not do.

While the work of Sister Joan Chittister is clear, what is not as clear is what her work will mean for the church going forward. Scholars have argued with and against Chittister since some of her earliest publications. We have already seen the ways in which the Vatican and church leaders have tried to silence her, but others want to engage in dialogue with her more so than the Vatican. For instance, Chittister warned that the times and minds of so many are changing in regards to the role women should play in the church, saying, "The papacy that fails to deal with so fundamental a change in the perceptions of humankind will be the papacy that presides over the philosophical demise

³¹ Tippet, "Sister Joan Chittister: Obedience and Action."

of the Church."³² According to Chittister, Rome will have a difficult time holding on to the church as we know. That does not sit well with some people. This is not her call to disobey every teaching offered by the magisterium; instead, she is calling for a holy obedience, similar to the one practiced by the Benedictines. If more of the church faithful would be willing to take a moment to question, pray, read scripture, and faithfully discern, we would have the holy obedience we see Chittister practice.

She brings the vows of the Benedictines and the charism instituted by the founders of the Order to the table when she discusses women and their role in the church. Chittister simultaneously dissents and maintains her faithfulness to the church. The message Chittister shares about the equality that our church desperately needs is a message that is revolutionary to an institution stuck in its ways. She makes all of these statements rooted in her vow of obedience. There are legitimate questions raised by the magisterium, but the first response to these questions must not be silence or blind obedience on the part of the faithful; rather, listening with the ears of the heart, searching for justice, participating in *lectio divina*, and engaging in thoughtful community dialogue will be far more fruitful for the church and its faithful, obedient servants.

³² Joan Chittister O.S.B. 1998. "Women in the Church: A New Pentecost in Process," in *The Papacy and the People of God*, ed. Gary MacEoin (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1998), 88.

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