

Joan Chittister's humility

Humility is a word that rarely intrudes into my vocabulary. It is unfashionable and reproachful. I was a little surprised, then, to find [12 recent columns](#) in *The National Catholic Reporter* (NCR) devoted to the topic, and that the writer was Joan Chittister. Both magazine and writer are often labelled as liberal rather than as traditional.



Chittister, a Benedictine sister, now 83 years old, has written and lectured extensively on religious and political topics. She has the gift peculiar to many men and women in contemplative orders of going straight to the point of what matters and of pointing out when various emperors have no clothes. She has been a consistent critic of inequality, violence and discrimination on the basis of race and gender in her home country, the United States.

Growing up in poverty with her mother and violent stepfather and affected by polio as a young religious sister, she had to struggle to come to an independent voice. She has called out violence and discrimination against women in church and state. She recognised early and wrote often that the Catholic Church in the west had largely lost the trust and allegiance of women. This, and her forthrightness and leadership among women religious in the United States, made her suspect to many Catholic authorities and a natural target in the Catholic culture wars.

As a result some have portrayed her unfairly as a feminist, secular warrior in religious dress. Certainly not as one who would devote 12 magazine columns to humility. But those familiar with her writing on social, cultural and political issues recognise that it is fed by her life as a Benedictine Sister, and particularly by her deep, lived reflection on the *Rule of St Benedict*, whose feast day occurred on 11 July. Her NCR columns draw on chapter six of the *Rule* in which Benedict describes the 12 steps of humility. She explores his thoughts to illuminate and critique aspects of our contemporary culture.

In her discussion she remarks on the similarity between the world of Benedict's day and our own. She sees both as affected by rapid change, marked by the breakdown of culture and civility. In introducing each of the rules she begins by describing examples of unattractive cultural traits in the public life of the present day United States and elsewhere.

These include an emphasis on individual will, a focus on 'me', my ideas and my gifts by politicians, a desire for autocracy that will impose simple solutions on complex problems, a concern to project an attractive image rather than to live attractively, a self-imposed pressure to succeed through unbroken work, the conviction that our nation and groups are infallibly the best, narcissism, and recourse to mockery as the staple in public debate.

She sets these tendencies against the steps outlined in Benedict's *Rule*, allowing the impoverishment of our public culture to emerge when set against apparently primitive instructions for living. The wisdom of the *Rule* emerges vindicated by the comparison.

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She recognises that for a modern reader some of the rules, such as the diatribe against laughter, a commonplace in classical thought, will seem to be absurd. Other steps will seem to diminish rather than to expand humanity. Benedict's remark that 'The third degree of humility is that a person for love of God submit himself to his Superior in all obedience' seems at first sight to endorse an authoritarian and infantilising regime. Chittister recognises that the identification of obedience with submission to rules has often characterised religious congregations and the Catholic Church as a whole.

She interprets Benedict's rule, however, in a way that sets it against the authoritarian impulse represented in some church circles and, more significantly, in such world leaders as Trump, Duterte, Putin and Orban. She emphasises the broad communitarian context within which Benedict sets obedience. There, obedience reflects the love of God which reaches out to all others in the world and so in the monastery. Obedience serves the common good, and it reflects acceptance of the responsibilities of those charged with ensuring it.

Within that context, obedience, as its derivation suggests, is a disposition of listening seriously to what one is asked to do within the community. It is set within a conversation. It will be reflected in following routines and regulations, but these are always measured against how they serve the common good. If, in new circumstances, they no longer do so, conversation will lead to their modification.

This is miles away from conceiving obedience as unreflective observance of rules, and just as distant from glorifying the strong leader who makes laws arbitrarily and insists on their observance. Such views of obedience neglect the communitarian context in which alone it makes sense. They are ruinous in churches and political societies.

In her reflections, as in her life, Joan Chittister demonstrates that she lives in the Catholic tradition, has studied it deeply and goes out to others to invite them to draw on its resources.



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Main image: Joan Chittister during a pre-tape of a 2006 episode of Meet the Press discussing topics related to religion, faith in politics in the US. (Photo by Alex Wong/Getty Images for Meet the Press)