



# Chittister, Censorship and an Adult Church

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Sister Patty Fawkner SGS

**Sister Patty Fawkner SGS asks whether censorship in the Catholic Church underestimates the intelligence and maturity of the faithful.**

**BY Patty Fawkner SGS**

It was decades ago, but I remember the day and the conversation well. It was a Monday morning and I was returning to work at a Catholic adult education organisation after a short break. I

was confronted with the news that, during my absence, our newly appointed director had removed copies of Paul Collins' book, *Papal Power*, from the organisation's bookstore.

Nominally, I was the deputy director and when I asked "Why?" was told "Because it only tells one side of the story". To which I quickly retorted, "Well, wouldn't the adult thing be to supply other books that told a different side?"

Till then, "Towards an Adult Church" was the mantra of all that we did within that organisation. The phrase encapsulated our vision and guided both content and process of our programs. The words certainly had been the "hook" for my joining the organisation.

Fast forward 23 years and I immediately recalled this event when news broke that an invitation to Sister Joan Chittister OSB to be a keynote speaker at the 2020 National Catholic Education Conference in Melbourne had subsequently been withdrawn. 'While there's some contention over whether a formal invitation was made, Joan believes that she was invited and has received no reason for the snub. This is in spite of Recommendation 16.7 of the *Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse* which calls for Church authorities to conduct a review of Church structures in relation to issues of transparency.

It is reminiscent of the 2018 ban imposed by the Hobart Archbishop on Father Frank Brennan SJ, precluding him from speaking at a conference on marriage equality.

It occurs to me that these three actions are anything but "adult" and, not only say something about the views some Church leaders' hold about some Catholic religious and clergy, they say something more about their views of us, "the faithful".

When we are denied information and when perspectives are censored, we are treated like children. Is it that we are neither intelligent enough nor mature enough to weigh different opinions and test these against our own conscience, experience and faith?

On a recent visit to Rome I was privileged to engage in an audience with Pope Francis as part of the Assembly of UISG, the international union of leaders of Catholic women's religious congregations. "Let's have a conversation," the Pope said as he discarded his prepared talk.

Among other things, Pope Francis encouraged the 850 leaders not to be afraid of dialogue either within or beyond the Church. He practised what he preached. He invited spontaneous questions from the audience and no topic was deemed to be 'out of bounds'. My heart warmed as I observed Francis listen intently and ask clarifying questions to ensure he understood the intent of the question. He responded with deep respect, openness, warmth and a refreshing blend of seriousness and humour.



Am I naïve in believing that Pope Francis would be open to dialogue with Joan Chittister?



Joan Chittister OSB

I wonder where the fear about us hearing Joan comes from? Here we have an 83-year-old Benedictine Sister who has effectively communicated the key message of the Gospel for 50 years and counting. Are we afraid that she would contaminate the faith of believers? In an engaging biography, the highly respected *National Catholic Reporter (NCR)* journalist, Tom Roberts recounts testimonies from numerous Catholics who say Joan has “has kept me in the Church”.

Joan Chittister is on record saying that the ordination of women is not her main concern; but empowering and enabling women to be heard and to contribute their God-given gifts to the Church, is certainly up there with her passion for an open, transparent and accountable Church. I would say, an adult Church.

With her media appearances, public lectures, 50 books, and her *Monasteries of the Heart* virtual community of nearly 20,000 members worldwide, it seems that Chittister is answering some hunger within the Catholic faithful.

She insists that social justice is not peripheral to the Gospel and that the Church’s spiritual tradition, including her own Benedictine spiritual tradition, has insights and resources aplenty for those who wish to make meaning of, and respond to, the signs of the times.

People respond to Joan Chittister because she never speaks down to them, rather she invites them to join her in grappling with the truth. She is, I believe, one of the great prophets of our time.

It is interesting – and concerning – to note that, while the story of the Melbourne ban on Chittister was of keen interest to *The New York Times*, *NCR* and the prestigious UK publication, *The Tablet*, as far as I am aware, no Australian diocesan Catholic publication has reported the story. Is the story not seen to be newsworthy by Catholic editors or is it indicative of further censorship?

Perhaps my naivety is on display yet again, but I choose to see two signs of hope. The first is that we have been promised that the 2020 Plenary Council process will be characterised by mutual dialogue and communal discernment. May this be so.

Then, in a letter sent to the people and pastors of Sydney during the Australian Bishops’ *Ad Limina* visit to Rome, Archbishop of Sydney Anthony Fisher OP weighed into the Israel Folau controversy. Archbishop Fisher disagreed with the treatment given to Folau “for daring to express unfashionable religious views”. The Archbishop continued, “The Australia we all know and love has, for the most part, been good at giving people the space to believe different things, to express them in free speech, to try to persuade others of their beliefs, and to practice what they preach.”

One hopes that the freedoms advocated for Folau be also extended to Joan Chittister. This would certainly help us move towards an adult Church.

## Patty Fawkner



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