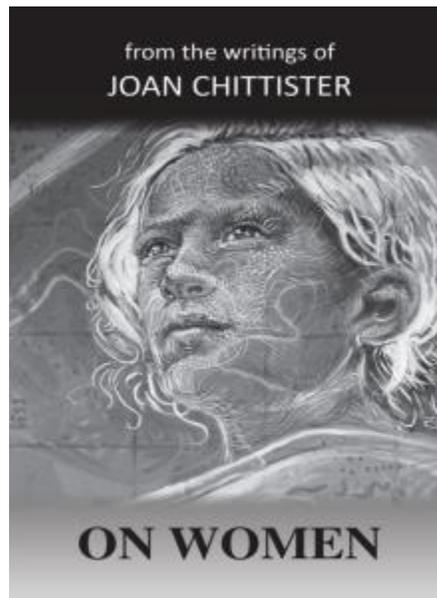


## Discussion Questions

# From the writings of Joan Chittister: On Women



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## Discussion 1: Introduction

We will use the first excerpt in the book (page 7) as bookends for this discussion, beginning and then ending with it. It will be interesting to see if or how your insights shift or deepen as you read these selections.

### **SELECTED PASSAGE:**

Read page 7

### **QUESTIONS:**

1. React to the above excerpts. What are your initial thoughts?
2. Have you experienced what you would describe as a coming home to yourself? Were there ways that it affected your life and those around you? Would you call it a resurrection?
3. Are there ways you still long to thrive, develop, be the artist of your life?

## Discussion 2: Questions

Today's excerpts deal with the importance of asking and listening to questions. This is a theme that runs through much of Sister Joan's work, and much of the On Women book.

### **SELECTED PASSAGES:**

Read pages 37, 38-40, 58

### **QUESTIONS:**

1. React to the above excerpt and, if you want, the broader passage it comes from. What are your initial thoughts?
2. What question(s), if any, loom largest in your mind now? What have been the main questions you have struggled with over the course of the years? Have they changed or mostly held to one issue?
3. Is it difficult for you to voice your questions? What stops you? Or, if

it's not so challenging for you to share your questions, what do you think helps to empower you to do so?

4. Have you had the experience of being questioned in a way that "opened the floodgates"?

### Discussion 3: Feminism

What is feminism? What is a feminist? Can a Catholic be a feminist? In the following selections, we are examining what Sister Joan writes about feminism and feminist spirituality.

#### **SELECTED PASSAGES:**

Read pages 23-25, 41-43, 45, 46-47, 48-49, 57

#### **QUESTIONS:**

1. "What is feminism?" What is feminist spirituality? How does "feminism" differ from "feminine?"
2. Sister Joan states that "feminism comes in all genders." What does she mean? Do you know any men who you would call "feminists?" Explain why you chose them.
3. Sister Joan maintains that feminist spirituality abandons violence as the means to power and opts for empowerment and nonviolence as a means to combat injustice and build a more peaceful society. Your thoughts on this? Have you ever participated in this expression of feminist power?
4. "Feminist spirituality demands that women become adults," writes Sister Joan. What does she mean by that? Give some examples from your own life where either you or another women you knew, did not embrace adulthood when it came to male/female relationships.

## Discussion 4: Personal Experience

In these selections Sister Joan relates some personal stories that have shaped her attitude towards the women's question and propelled her to action.

### **SELECTED PASSAGES:**

Read pages 8, 19-20, 26-27, 35-36, 62, 66, 74

### **QUESTIONS:**

1. Are there questions you would ask Sister Joan about her journey to feminism?
2. Can you relate to Joan Chittister's journey? In what way?
3. Have you experienced the benefits of "good sister," "nice woman" credentials? In what way? Have you felt the tension of risking those credentials?

## Discussion 5: Church and Sexism

Many of Sister Joan's passages are devoted to sexism in the church. Rightfully so, since as a Roman Catholic and as a member of a religious order she has a special responsibility to critique the sins of the institution to which she belongs.

### **SELECTED PASSAGES:**

Read pages 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 16, 18, 21-22, 34, 64, 71-72

### **QUESTIONS:**

1. How might the doctrines of salvation, sexuality, marriage, family, and sin be different if there were input from women?
2. Sister Joan discusses the notion of "power" as it is presently exercised by the church and contrasts it with "power" as defined in feminist spirituality. How would you explain the difference?

3. Sister Joan writes that the oppression of women throughout history is due, in large part, to the teachings of religion, specifically the religious doctrine of female inferiority. Do you agree with her? Explain. If you do agree, what is one thing you can do to challenge the church.
4. Sister Joan maintains that the church's position of women undermines its integrity, that it is impossible for it to speak with any authority on matters of conscience and morality while mired in blatant sexism. Do you agree? Explain.

## Discussion 6: Women in Scripture and Church

This subtitle may be a surprise since we don't hear much about women in the Scriptures—though they are present in prominent roles and women are almost invisible in official church structures.

### **SELECTED PASSAGES:**

Read pages 31, 50, 65, 67-68, 80-83

### **QUESTIONS:**

1. What is your image of Mary? What virtues of Mary's were emphasized by your teachers, from the pulpit?
2. Do the exercise that Sister Joan suggested: take a piece of paper and write down all the statues, monuments, and cornerstones you have seen inscribed to women. Do it for the city in which you live. Now list five women in your living area that you think should be honored with a public memorial. Who are they? Include women who have contributed to the political, social, and spiritual development of your area. Why have you chosen them? How would you honor them for posterity?
3. Sister Joan writes that though women are given prominence in the Gospels and are sainted for exemplary lives, they have been treated

throughout history as “consumers” of the spiritual life, not its shapers. Do you agree with her? If you don’t, can you name five areas where women have shaped the theology, doctrines and spirituality of the church.

4. After praying the “Litany of Women for the Church” how did you feel? Is there one particular woman that you’d like to know more about. Is there one woman that is a mentor or hero of yours? Explain why.

## Discussion 7: Language

An issue that is controversial in some circles is gender-inclusive language for God and for humanity. Though the typical language of the Catholic and Christian churches has referred to people as “brothers/brethren,” and “mankind,” and exclusively called God “Father,” and “King,” Sister Joan and others have been calling for this change for decades. And long before our time, saints, biblical authors, and everyday people used images of God that were feminine or gender-neutral. Sister Joan explores why the language we use matters, and more.

### **SELECTED PASSAGES:**

Read pages 9, 51-56

### **QUESTIONS:**

1. What is your take on gender-inclusive language? Do you have critiques of it? Are there aspects of prayer or liturgical life where you especially welcome it or would not want it to be used? Why?
2. Can you think of any specific examples of how male-only language for God and humanity influenced your decisions or thinking?
3. What is it like for you to use gender-inclusive, or even feminine language for God and humanity? What came up for you as you

explored the resources above?

4. What images of God are most meaningful or evocative for you now? What language or images have made sense to you at other stages of your life? Do you work with any ideas of God that have not been mentioned so far?

## Discussion 8: Anger

Anger is an issue that many women are uncomfortable with, conditioned as they are to be passive, compliant, and “nice.” In fact anger is often taught as an human flaw, rather than a virtue. This despite the fact, as theologian and long-time peace activist William Sloan Coffin points out: “Jesus was angry over 50% of the time, and it’s very dangerous to try to improve on Jesus. The anger needs to be focused, but anger is what maintains your sanity. Anger keeps you from tolerating the intolerable.”

### **SELECTED PASSAGES:**

Read pages 76-77, 78-79

### **QUESTIONS:**

1. Add to Sister Joan’s list of those using anger to drive their work for change. Who are the examples you look to as models of holy anger?
2. Watch for examples of gendered anger today in ads, on media, in conversations, in experiences as you move through your day. What did you find? Are there insights or learnings for you from your experiment today?
3. Can you relate to anger being a force for good? Have you experienced this? Have you experienced the lack of anger as a limitation or as empowering oppression?

## Discussion 9: Internalizing Messages

Why do women cooperate in their oppression? Why do they believe about themselves many of negative messages and stereotypes that society promotes?

### SELECTED PASSAGES:

Read pages 17, 28, 30, 60-61

### QUESTIONS:

1. What sentence or idea from the highlighted passages are most challenging or clarifying for you? What would you say in response to the thoughts raised here?
2. Have you ever found yourself "living down" to the sexist assumptions about women that surround us? Have you felt angry at yourself, or at other women, for the ways that misogyny affected you? Have you, like Margaret Atwood writes, found yourself in the habit of surveilling your own behavior to be a "good woman"? What effect, if any, did this have on your life?
3. Sister Joan writes, "Feminist spirituality encourages the kind of self-knowledge that recognizes both its strengths and its limitations." Clearly this is contrary to the kind of world view that oppresses anyone based on stereotypes about their gender, race, sexuality, or any other part of their identity. Have you arrived at this level of self-knowledge, or made progress toward it? What helped you?

## Discussion 10: Why I Stay

Sister Joan wrote her classic essay, "Why I Stay," for *Lutheran Women Today* 25 years ago. Its impact on individuals and community can be glimpsed by the number of times it has been referenced and shared in the ensuing 24 years.

## SELECTED PASSAGE:

Read pages 84-89

## QUESTIONS:

1. List the reasons Sister Joan gives for staying in the church. Are there any that speak to you? Are there others you would add?
2. Is there another institution, group, space whose participation raises the same dilemma or questions for you? Do Sister Joan's answers speak to you in that situation?
3. Reflect on the image of the oyster and pearl. Sister Joan uses it for her model of the ministry of irritation. Can you relate to that ministry?
4. In a 2005 newspaper interview, when Joan Chittister was asked, "What do you tell women who want to leave the church?" she replied, "I always tell them, if you're going to leave, don't leave quietly. And if you're going to stay, don't stay quietly." What do you think of that advice?