Dear Joan Chittister: Conversations with Women in the Church Discussion Guide

Thank you for your interest in Dear Joan Chittister: Conversations with Women in the Church (Twenty-Third Publications, 2019). As you read our stories about sisterhood, speaking truth, and standing up to the patriarchy, we hope you feel encouraged to share stories of your own. Use this book as a chance to start conversations with others in your parish, campus ministry, friend groups, or greater community.

What follows is a six-week discussion guide, framed by the three major movements of Benedictine life: ora et labora et lege -- prayer, study, and work. This rhythm guides Sr. Joan’s community, the Benedictine Sisters of Erie, and other Benedictine communities around the world. During each session, participants are invited into a time of prayer, reflection on the questions raised in the book, and a corresponding activity. Feel free to adapt this guide for the needs of your group.

Special thanks to co-author Meghan D’Andrea for developing this discussion guide.
Sisterhood: Week 1

Introduction

One of the great gifts we received during our time together at the inaugural Joan Chittister Institute for Contemporary Spirituality was the gift of each other, of sisterhood. Throughout our two weeks we bonded over the shared experiences of friendships lost and gained, of relationships that build and sustain us, of the desire for holy and real friends—sisters—to share the journey with us. We know the difficulties in finding those types of friendships. We hope our stories are an invitation for you to reflect on your own experiences of sisterhood and to join in our community.

Ora (Prayer)

1. Create an environment for prayer and reflection. Light a candle to mark the beginning of this sacred time.
2. Gather a variety of images of women -- biblical, church, historical, or contemporary. They can be traditional images such as statues, icons, and prayer cards. Or use photographs, magazine clippings, or book illustrations. Scatter these throughout the prayer space.
3. Invite participants to spend a few minutes perusing the pictures. Participants should quietly walk through the space, briefly looking at each woman pictured.
4. Using a bell, or some gentle type of signaling sound, call the participants back together. Ask them to share one or two words that came to mind as they saw each image.
5. Instruct participants to walk through the gallery of images once again, but this time to pause at a particular image that draws them. What is it about this image, this woman, that captures your attention? What is this woman inviting you to?
6. After five minutes of silent contemplation, call the group back together. Ask them to share their observations of the women. How do you experience sisterhood with these women?

Lege (Study)

At the end of each letter, the authors pose questions to Joan. How would you answer these questions?

- Who are your sisters? Who has recognized your gifts?
- How can we encourage more women to recognize each other as sisters?
- Which saints have inspired and invigorated you and your spiritual journey?
- How do we create community and maintain friendships across miles and barriers?
- How do we find Eucharistic sisterhoods in ministry and daily life?
- How do we recognize the miracles other people offer us? How do we see the gifts of others despite the less-than-perfect situations of our world and Church?

Labora (Work)

Consider the letters and questions posed by the authors. Write an answer to one of the questions based on your own experience. Invite participants to share their letters if they feel comfortable.
Sisterhood: Week 2

Ora (Prayer)

1. Create an environment for prayer and reflection. Light a candle to mark the beginning of this sacred time.
2. Invite participants to bring their own rosary, or have some available.
4. Pray a decade of the rosary while meditating on this mystery. Prior to each "Hail Mary," call to mind the name of a sister who is in need.
5. Consider: how do Mary and Elizabeth exhibit sisterhood? What example do they offer us in our own quest for holy friendship?

Lege (Study)

The following questions can serve as a starting point for your group conversation:

- Which letter most resonated with you?
- Was there a topic or situation brought up in the letter that mirrors your own experience in church?
- How do the stories shared by the women model "church at its best"?
- What from Joan’s responses captured your attention?
- Have you experienced a moment of sisterhood within the church? Outside the church?
- Where do you see a lack of sisterhood within the church or your own life?
- What questions has your experience of sisterhood cultivated within you? Have you found answers? How?
- Do you desire sisterhood? What changes need to be made to cultivate sisterhood in your life? Your church? Your community?

Labora (Work)

Write your own letter to Joan or a woman wisdom figure in your life about your experience of sisterhood. Is there a moment in your life that really sticks out to you? Then, imagine her writing back. How might Joan or your wisdom figure respond to your story?
Speaking Truth: Week 3

Introduction

The impetus for this section came from a quote that Joan shared with us spoken by Mother Jones: “I will speak my truth wherever I please.” At first, most of us questioned if we even had a truth. But then, with courage and conviction, we began not only to speak our truths to ourselves and others, but to imagine speaking them “wherever we pleased”, even in the places and to the people who would much rather have us be silent. The stories we share in this chapter are our truths; they are truths filled with happiness, holiness and hurt. We speak them as a beacon to call others and our church to authentic living and truth telling.

Ora (Prayer)

1. Create an environment for prayer and reflection. Light a candle to mark the beginning of this sacred time.
2. Read John 20:11-18 out loud to the group.
3. Ask participants to immerse themselves in the scene. Imagine themselves as a character or witness to the scene.
4. Read the story out loud a second time.
5. Prod the participants to use their imaginations even more -- what sounds do you hear? What can you smell? See? Taste? Touch?
6. Read the passage one more time, slowly and carefully.
7. Give a moment or two of silence. Then call participants back to attention.
8. Consider: What insights did you gain from being in the story? What truths does Mary Magdalene speak? Why do you think Jesus chose her to bear that truth to the apostles and the world? What are the risks and consequences she has faced throughout the centuries for speaking the truth? How has the truth of Mary Magdalene been spoken for her and corrupted?

Lege (Study)

Once again, reflect on the questions posed by the authors in this section:

- How do we become our authentic selves? How do we discern the myriad of ways God speaks in our lives? How do we gain the courage to act and speak those truths?
- Who are the people that show us how to speak up and out? What are the scenarios that demand a response from us?
- How can we invite others to be vulnerable? How do we accompany others in the midst of grief?
- How do we endure in the face of our own "church hurts"? How can we maintain our faith in the midst of corporate sin and scandal?
- How can the church reach out to people who have been wounded?
- What would it look like for the global church to lament the suffering of creation? What human habits need to die to save the earth? How can we help the environment resurrect so that it can continue to be a life-giving home for generations to come?

Labora (Work)

Imagine you’ve been given ten minutes to "speak your truth wherever you please." Where would you speak it? To whom would you speak it? What would you say? Write your truth or say it out loud to the group.
Speaking Truth: Week 4

Ora (Prayer)

1. Create an environment for prayer and reflection. Light a candle to mark the beginning of this sacred time.
2. Choose someone to read the collect from the Feast of St. Mary Magdalene:

   O God, whose Only Begotten Son entrusted Mary Magdalene before all others with announcing the great joy of the Resurrection, grant, we pray, that through her intercession and example we may proclaim the living Christ and come to see him reigning in your glory. Who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever.
3. Choose another person to read the preface from the Feast of St. Mary Magdalene:

   It is truly right and just, our duty and our salvation, always and everywhere to give you thanks, Lord, holy Father, almighty and eternal God, whose mercy is no less than His power, to preach the Gospel to everyone, through Christ, our Lord. In the garden He appeared to Mary Magdalene, who loved him in life, who witnessed his death on the cross who sought him as he lay in the tomb who was the first to adore him when he rose from the dead, and whose apostolic duty was honored by the apostles that the good news of life might reach the ends of the earth. And so Lord, with all the Angels and Saints, we, too, give you thanks, as in exultation we acclaim: Holy, holy, holy Lord, God of power and might ...
4. Pause for a few moments of silent reflection.
5. Consider: What is the truth these liturgical prayers speak about Mary Magdalene? How do they call us to imitate her courage in proclaiming the truth "wherever we please"?

Lege (Study)

The following questions can serve as a starting point for your group conversation:

- Which story struck you most forcefully? Which caught your attention?
- Do you share a truth with these women? What is your truth?
- How can you find the courage to speak and live it every day?
- Who needs to hear your truth?
- What do you hope will change by speaking your truth? What are the risks?
- What makes speaking truth worth the risks?

Labora (Work)

Using a mind-map, or another technique, brainstorm your truths. Can you come up with five “truths”? For each truth, take note of who might need to hear it. Write the risks and consequences of speaking that truth. Also, make note of the reward for doing so. Does the positive outweigh the negative? Does one of your truths need to be spoken? Write it out.
Standing Up to the Patriarchy: Week 5

Introduction

Let’s face it, church can be hard for women. We are left off the altar, out of prayer, and told time and time again in word and action that we are not capable, wanted or enough. For each of us, there came a moment when enough was enough and we had to stand up against the domination and degradation of women. These stories tell of big and small ways in which we took a stand against the patriarchy.

Ora (Prayer)

1. Create an environment for prayer and reflection. Light a candle to mark the beginning of this sacred time.
2. Using a piece of newsprint or some medium that allows for everyone to see, solicit names of women in the church -- historical or modern. Consider the women in our church, our history, and our lives who have, in their own ways, stood up to the patriarchy. Write those names in a list on the newsprint.
3. If your group is having trouble with names, here are a few to get you started: St. Scholastica, St. Clare of Assisi, St. Catherine of Siena, St. Hildegard of Bingen, Dorothy Day, Mother Thea Bowman.
4. When a list has been drafted, begin praying the litany. You can either speak or sing it.
5. Have someone read a name out loud. The rest of the group will respond, “Pray for us” or another suitable ending.

Lege (Study)

Reflect on the questions the authors posed to Joan at the conclusion of their letters:

- Scripture is filled with masculine language and troubling statements about women. How might we handle this in parishes?
- How can we empower other women to preach? How can we encourage lay leadership in our own parishes and dioceses?
- Isn’t part of being Catholic to question the wrongs we see in the world?
- How are we each called to pursue our faith in our unique vocations?
- How have you navigated a world in which you are not welcome? Where do you find the courage to walk forward, often alone, and proclaim your truth to all those who have stood in your way?

Labora (Work)

Imagine a Church without the effects of the patriarchy. What would it look like? What is your vision of an “ideal” Church? What steps can be made here and now to help achieve that vision? Describe your vision and hopes in an “open letter” to the patriarchy.
Standing Up to the Patriarchy: Week 6

Ora (Prayer)

1. Create an environment for prayer and reflection. Light a candle to mark the beginning of this sacred time.
2. Provide the group with the text of the traditional Our Father.
3. Together, pray the words of the prayer slowly.
4. Rewrite the prayer to use either feminine language and imagery of God, or gender non-specific language of God.
5. Together, pray the words of the new translation.
6. Pause for a few moments of silent reflection.
7. Consider: What difference does the language of the prayer make? What was meaningful to you in each version?

Lege (Study)

The following questions can serve as a starting point for your group conversation:

- For most of her life, Sr. Joan has been standing up to the patriarchy in a myriad of ways. She is a tireless fighter for equality, inclusion, and a vision of church that sees in all people the divine image. Why do you think these women reached out to Joan with their stories?
- How did Joan use her experience to respond to the women?
- After reading through these letters, reflect on your own experiences with patriarchy. How have you experienced the patriarchy -- positively and negatively -- in your life?
- Have you ever felt the need to stand up to the patriarchy? Have you done so?
- Do you need to take a stand? In what way? How can you do so?
- How might women, and men, come together to stand up to the patriarchy? What is something that can be done right here and now to take a stand?
- What might the world, society, and the church look like without the patriarchy?

Labora (Work)

Write a prayer expressing your hopes for the church. Pray it out loud as a group to close the session.