

# A Letter to Pope Francis

## *An Appeal for the Catholic Church to Fully Respect the Dignity of Women*

Personally delivered to him on January 21, 2016

Dear Pope Francis,

As I pray, I feel the Holy Spirit stirring my heart to use the occasion of meeting you to share a deep concern I have for our Church. An ache and sorrow, actually. I rejoice as I watch your stalwart efforts to renew our Church, especially in the area of collegiality and empowerment of the laity. But over my many years of service within the Church (I'm just two years younger than you), I am saddened to encounter over and over a very deep wound at the heart of the Church, a wound which, I am convinced, infects and weakens every aspect of Church life. That wound, Holy Father, is the way the Church treats women. Except for a few token representatives, women's voices are not directly heard in plenary synods, commissions, and tribunals. This thwarts the dynamic effect we women could have on dialogue and decision-making in the fashioning of church policies and practices.

Women's absence in these arenas is a huge loss, depriving the Church of the practical wisdom women have from faith lived on the ground in daily life and from insights given from our pondering God's word in our hearts. Women's access into Church forums in which we can share these experiences could do much to help our Church become more supple (open to surprises of the Holy Spirit), less cerebral and abstract, less rule-bound and authoritarian. In short, more real. Not to mention less patriarchal and less clerical. How can we have a healthy Church that truly embodies the compassionate mind and heart of Christ if our males are deprived of a steady diet of give-and-take dialogue with women-as-equals (by "equal" I mean fully empowered by the Holy Spirit)? The truth is, Holy Father, in the Church as institution, the baptism of girls and women seems not to be seen as fully empowering us with God's Holy Spirit as is the baptism of boys and men. Thus, in institutional structures of the Church, women's way of "imaging" God is muted. Simply because we are women there are certain opportunities of service from which we are systematically excluded.

If I may use my own life experience as an example: My ministry to awaken citizens on the issue of the death penalty (actually, to evangelize them: Jesus and his teaching are at the heart of every talk I give) has brought me to speak to U.N. commissions, Congress, governors, citizens in civic groups, and religious bodies all over the United States and other countries. In Protestant churches I am allowed to preach, yet, in my own Church I am not permitted to preach a homily. In fact, because I am a woman (a member of the laity, actually), I am not even permitted to proclaim the Gospel at Mass. Present liturgical rules prohibit me or any woman from proclaiming the Gospel. My voice is muted in my own Church, whom I love and have served all

of my life. It is a wound, a pain, an ache that never goes away—not only for me, but for all women. No doubt it is one of the reasons why young women as well as older ones distance themselves from the Catholic Church. They know they will never be admitted to full participation. They feel discounted, disrespected. What a loss of vibrancy to the Body of Christ. This saddens me immensely.

Somehow, over the years, we in the Church have lost the kind of shared ministry Jesus had on the road with his disciples, both women and men, and that Paul shared with women as he established Christian churches far beyond the confines of Palestine. How can we once again recover that vibrancy?

I hope this doesn't weary your spirit. You have already quickened life in our Church in a way I haven't witnessed since Vatican II. I rejoice in your boldness and your joy. I love that you're getting us out of buildings and rigid rule-following and leading us out to the hurting ones on the margins of society and even into the suffering of Mother Earth herself. I thank God for sending you to us, and I pray for you every time I think of you, which is often.

I am in heart and training a religious educator, so I can't help but begin to imagine a three-to-five-year catechetical (educational) pathway whereby the entire Church might be enabled to learn and dialogue and grow together toward a fuller understanding and embodiment of every woman and man as full-fledged, participating members of the Body of Christ. A huge task. But with the fire of the Holy Spirit and with trust in each other, surely...surely God will accomplish in us more than we can dream or imagine. One thing I do know, Pope Francis...I TRUST YOU.

Love abounding in Christ,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Helen Prejean, CSJ". The signature is written in dark ink and is positioned below the text "Love abounding in Christ,".

Sister Helen Prejean, CSJ