Joan Chittister, a Benedictine Sister of Erie, Pennsylvania is an international lecturer and social analyst known for her work for justice and equality especially for women. She holds a graduate degree from the University of Notre Dame and a doctorate in speech communications theory from Penn State University, is the author of 60 books, and an online columnist for the National Catholic Reporter. She is a founding member of The Global Peace Initiative of Women and the founder and executive director of Benetvision, and a former LCWR president.

In 1996, Joan wrote the book, The Fire in These Ashes, an exploration of the spirituality of contemporary religious life. In the preface she stated, “Our task is to live this time now, our time, well so that a future model can rise from these ashes with confidence and with courage.” In an interview with LCWR communications director Annmarie Sanders, IHM she reflects on religious life now — 25 years later.

First, I’d say that everything we saw as we tried to look ahead 25 years ago was right. We named it. We said this change is coming, and we had the sense to say that we don’t know what it will look like and that it would take its own shape. This current shape is dead and is not coming back.

Now, remember — institutional upheaval is universal. The entire globe is in a time of flux. Everything is rattling around and we have very little stability. Thirty percent of first marriages end in divorce. But love will not die, and the spiritual life will not die. But we have to get out in front of the change and quit blocking it. We have to stop bringing people into institutional caves of religious institutes that are still running on the leftover theology of sacrifice. The theology needed now for the average 30- or 40-year-old woman coming into our communities is not one of sacrifice or discipline. Women today feel a very serious call to the spiritual life and are seeking to become their best self, live a happy community life, and do productive ministry. We have to be able to let go of the reins and open our arms and love those coming to us, form them, talk seriously to them, and then let go and ask them what they want to do and how they will do it in a way that serves the lives of others. This I know for sure about religious life — that it should be a developmental life that serves the lives of others.
When I was a kid in Catholic school, I got fascinated by the story of Moses leading his people through the desert. That story was like a thorn in my neck. The thorn was the line — "they wandered for 40 years." When I got old enough to read, I got interested in reading spiritual maps. I got one of Palestine and Egypt and I looked up where the Israelites left from and where they were going. The distance was so short. They could have made it in 10 days. For years, I read Genesis over and over to understand why it included this statement about wandering for 40 years. Many years later, I finally found the answer — and it was in Chronicles, which I had never read in my life. There Moses is retelling the history of the Hebrew people and says we wandered in the desert for 40 years -- until the older generation died off.

When I read this, I said, "My God, of course! They had to get Egypt out of their system. They had to get to a generation that had no connection to what older generations had come from, what they were mad about, what they were upset thinking about." This is exactly the plight of modern religious life. We will wander in the desert until the older generation passes on.

After that realization, I suddenly heard Jesus’ words, “unless the seed fall into the ground itself, it remains alone and dies” quite differently. The seed by itself remains alone unless it dies.

We are at the end of this form of religious life. We are at the funeral and we should do the funeral well. We should open everything and quit looking for answers. Our questions today don’t have answers and that is their answer. We are called to follow the question. We have to allow people to go where they have to go, and just make sure they are doing what they do out of the context of the community’s spiritual tradition. It’s not complex; actually, it’s pretty simple. There is massive change going on, and if religious life doesn’t move with the change, then there is no use for its existence.

You drove home the point in your book that the “one and only purpose of religious life is the single-minded search for God.” You wrote of how essential this work is for the good of the world, and especially when there is much confusion and uncertainty in society. That confusion and uncertainty have seemed only to become more pervasive in these ensuing 25 years. Is the work of “seeking God, seeing God, and speaking God,” as you say, ever as important today and if so, why?

It is as true today as the day I wrote it. The only purpose of religious life is to bring the charisms of Jesus to the needs of the world. We are bound to the charisms of Jesus-and the charisms of our traditions and we have to know the history. But we are not bound to copying them. We have traditions that can institutionalize very quickly and we have to be very careful about not letting that happen. We have to decide what we want to keep of religious life as it was and to bring it to life as it is now. And the rest of it? Well, we don’t have to close it down, but maybe we can see if it just dies out. We need to see what others really want from the tradition. In a Benedictine community, we want lectio. So, we don’t have to institutionalize anything else — just provide that which makes our spirit grow. It is very difficult to enforce what people don’t want. You can — you could punish for it — but if you do, you just bring yourself one step closer to your own demise. There are all sorts of people out there who would like to live religious life, if we don’t over embroider it with non-essentials.

You wrote in The Fire in These Ashes that “the function of religious life is to keep the question of God — and God’s questions — high on the horizons of the world.” Do you feel that this is still a function of religious life today?

I think it means so much today, maybe more so than when I wrote it. The
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questions of God are the questions of the time. We cannot live anymore for answers. When Jesus said, “Follow me,” he didn’t say, “Come in and I’ll give you a book with the answers.” He said, “See what I am doing. See what the people want.”

Religious life through the years has gone from an institutional life to a ministerial life to a religious life that abandons answers in favor of questions. And the questions we must pursue are not ones with answers. That means to live this life you have to be free enough to follow the questions of the time. We are here now; we are not here in Jesus’ time. We have to bring Jesus’ charisms to the questions of our times. Follow the questions — and there are so many of them today: racism, sexism, faith and science, immigration, economics.

Following the questions of today looks different in religious life especially because in so many communities the median age is 75 or 80. I believe that there are four actions which every religious community must take in light of the questions of our time: publish, convene, join, and lead. Depending upon our personal gifts, we all can do at least one of these, no matter our age. Every religious community cannot study all the questions, but they can study some of them as a community and develop expertise. We should be publishing on these questions, we should convene conversations on them, we should join groups that are in pursuit of the same unanswerable questions. This doesn’t mean that we all have to go to demonstrations, but it does mean we need to do what we do best: learn, take positions, share our positions with others however we can. We can use our community publications to include reflections from our sisters about the questions, those who blog can write about the questions. Publish, convene, join, lead — this is applying the charism of Jesus to our times.

Young people are looking to us to do this — to bring our conscience to the public arena. If we can get those four pillars under us, we will be very active and effective voices in this world.

You wrote then that as religious life becomes smaller it “requires more life of us than we have ever known before.” You also said that this shift in numbers “gives us the opportunity, the reason, the mandate to examine our lives, to begin again, to dredge up what is best in us, to spill it recklessly across the canvas of the earth, to bank within us one more
time the fires of commitment." You are continuously examining your life. How is that for you? What challenges do you encounter yourself as you age, and your own community grows smaller?

One challenge is not to let age dictate what I can do. As Dorothy Day aged, she didn’t sit around asking whether she should stay at home or go out on the street. There is still a strain that has been carefully planted in us that tells us that our age limits us. I am having that experience. When I arrive to speak somewhere and people see how old I am, they look at me as if to say, “What are you doing here?” Once they get over the shock of my age and I start speaking, they suddenly start treating me as a thinking human being.

Q You have said that the centers of religious communities should be places of “reflection where the Gospel and the globe are brought together for all to see.” Would you still place a high value on our communities being such centers?

Bringing the Gospel and the globe together is what I see many young people today doing. I think it is essential that we stay close to young people and not underestimate their impact. The Nuns & Nones movement is a good example. If you listen to young people, they will tell you what they are looking for. Then, you have to ask yourself: Is our community imaging what young people want? Are we safe places to be? Are we these centers of reflection?

Q You said in your book, “Older members must stay in touch with new ideas. Where age predominates, the community mind must become a young vision rooted in old values, or we may well confuse what we’ve always done with what we’re supposed to do. Old age is the time to try new things with abandon and imagination.” Twenty-five years later, our communities have become even older. How do you believe we are doing with keeping a young vision? What recommendations can you make for staying in touch with new ideas?

I am not totally certain of this, but I think that whatever religious life is going to be in the next 25-year period, for at least some, it will be a “come-and-go” experience. Some people will not come and stay forever. They might stay 10 years and move on because that is what their generation has taught them to do. So, the only question is: Are we going to consider it a failure if they move on — or will we actually prepare them to move on so the next people coming in can joyfully lead the community for their time? Some people will stay for life, but we don’t have to make everyone feel as if they have somehow abandoned God and the community if they move on. At least this is the vision of the future that I have come to in my life.
Q: In your writing, you emphasized the essential place of intellectual development. You wrote, "The question for religious of this time is: 'What don't I know and why don't I know it?' The intellectual pursuit of the great theological, political, economic, and social questions of the time is now the essence of religious discipline in this century. On the quality of intellectual development practiced in religious life rides the ultimate effectiveness of a congregation, the depth of its spiritual life, the value of its ministries, the caliber of its members, and the prophetic dimension of its charism." Do you continue to place an emphasis on intellectual development and, if so, why?

The ongoing intellectual development of the present membership is essential. We have to study, and we have to be trained for what we do. We have to keep feeding that core of our communities — and train them so that they know that in these times in which we live there are no answers.

A psychological deficiency of these times is that we got used to having answers. People my age are still looking for answers. They want answers to the questions about new vocations to religious life, to ministry, to finances because in the past we gave answers. Today we have to look at what we are doing — which is most likely good — but is it good for this time? Is it the best we can do for this time? If so, then do it. But when we are led into new questions and we become afraid, we fall back on what we have known. Instead of looking realistically at our aging and asking what new understandings we can generate or what new work might we do, we go back to where there are answers. Answers are becoming a burden. I’d say — go where you would not expect to go. Don’t plan anything, just stumble along and you’ll do it and out of that will come light for the next step. I used to spend so much time when I was younger looking at the invitations I was receiving from all over the world to go and speak and walking around Erie saying, "As a Benedictine, should I really be going?" One day I woke up and knew that I needed to go.

That is why the story of the Israelites wandering for 40 years is important. It’s a reminder that we have to put down the old ideas in religious life and let the new happen.

Q: Is there anything else you would like to say?

The idea I keep returning to these days about religious life is this: We have to remember that we are here to do charity, but religious life has to do with something beyond charity. We have to keep asking: Whose life are you living besides your own? That is a big question and we have an obligation to live in such a way that it affects a life beyond our own. You can call that politics, but I call it the Gospel.

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