

Feminist nun 'begs crumbs' for daughters of the future

By Karen M. Franz

"It is absolutely too late for us," Sister Joan Chittister, OSB, told her nearly all-women audience. "There is not a woman in this auditorium who is young enough to see a realization of the full vision" of a non-sexist society.

Nevertheless she said, like the Canaanite woman in the gospel story, the women of today must beg for crumbs, "not for ourselves, but because our daughter has a demon."

"There are women all over this world looking to the American woman . . . the woman who has some legal rights — to be the voice of the voiceless," said Sister Chittister, prioress of the Mount Saint Benedict priory in Erie, Pa., and president of the Conference of American Benedictine Prioresses.

The Benedictine nun, author of two books on feminism and the Church, gave a day-long presentation Friday, June 5, at Nazareth College's Schultz Community Center. Addressing the topic "The Role of Women in Church and Society," she offered numerous — and sometimes graphic — examples of the sexist demons that have afflicted women throughout the ages.

Participants shuddered visibly as Sister Chittister described the widespread Third-World custom of mutilating pre-pubescent girls' genitals in order to preserve the girls' virginity by ensuring that they will never experience sexual pleasure. As a result of this practice, she said, men can be certain that their brides are pure, their wives will be faithful and their heirs will be true.

"No mainstream Christian Church has spoken against this practice until the Methodist Church spoke 18 months ago," she said, noting that the Catholic Church investigated the practice, but — in deference to native cultures — ruled that it is acceptable. Yet this same Church, the feminist nun observed ironically, forbids the use of native dances in liturgical celebrations.

In the Third World and elsewhere, Sister Chittister asserted, "To be born female is simply to have less scope for human development. The minute a baby is born a girl, she is handicapped."

She backed up that statement by citing a number of statistics: 85 percent of the world's illiterates are women; women are one-third of the world's workforce, but earn only 10 percent of its wages; in the industrialized world, women have only one-half the amount of free time men have.

"As soon as men come into a field they are promoted, because men are 'natural leaders,'" she said, noting that 85 percent of elementary school teachers are women, yet 75 percent of principals are men.

Women and their concerns are treated as invisible and trivial, she observed, citing men's references to their wives and co-workers as "the little woman," "girls in the plant" or "the gal in the office." "To be a woman with intelligence and experience and management ability is not acceptable at all," Sister Chittister remarked.

When women are angry or upset, men accuse them of being overly emotional or hysterical, she said. But "when men get hysterical, they call it war, and they send some bishop out to bless it."

Why, then, have women not rebelled against this oppressive system? The answer, Sister Chit-



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tister said, can be found in the scenarios outlined by social psychologists who studied blacks during the civil rights movement.

Social scientists believe that all oppressed peoples exhibit a specific pattern of behavior. First among the characteristics of oppressed peoples is the tendency to internalize the message of the oppressor.

"So it is women who will tell you that a woman can't be president because women are too emotional!" Sister Chittister said. "It's women who will tell you that women are unreasonable. Martin Luther King said it was not his job to convert the whites, but to conscientize blacks."

Secondly, oppressed peoples live down to expectations. To illustrate this point, the Benedictine nun related the story of one study involving little boys. When they were asked what they wanted to be when they grew up, the boys excitedly shouted numerous ideas. But when they were asked what they would want to be if they were little girls, they fell silent. Finally, one boy said, "Well, if I were a girl, I guess I'd have to be nothing."

Yet another characteristic of oppressed peo-

ples is a tendency to conform to a stereotype. If one woman is placed within any group — a parish council, for example — she will automatically begin to assume such "women's work" as serving coffee. Sister Chittister observed, therefore, that Uncle Tom of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* wasn't a traitor to his race, but a typical example of the oppressed.

When they become frustrated by the injustices dealt to them, oppressed people turn their anger in on themselves, rather than striking out at the oppressors, she observed, noting that during the riots of the 1960s, blacks didn't burn Beverly Hills, they burned Watts. Similarly, when a woman is raped, other women will consider whether she "deserved" it or brought the attack on by wearing enticing clothes.

Finally, once they have been aware of the injustice with which they are treated, oppressed people become paranoid, seeing injustice at every turn. Thus, when "feminist" men try to eliminate sexism in their behavior, oversensitive women frequently attack them for minor infractions.

"Anger can make us unable to function," Sis-

ter Chittister cautioned. "The stage after rage is indifference," which can be incapacitating or energizing.

She emphasized, however, that the demon of sexism does not only afflict women; it also has a detrimental effect on men and society at large. Sexism imposes upon men a drive to succeed, to attain the most power and control.

"So every time you look at a man, you look at a failure," Sister Chittister remarked. "The minute a man who has more success or more power walks into the room, he makes every other man a failure."

From their earliest years, she said, men are confronted with unreasonable expectations. A toddler, for example, may be told, "Take care of your mother!"

"We make men responsible for a full half of the human race, (which) they're told is basically irresponsible." This burden, she asserted, may be responsible for the phenomenon of middle-aged men walking out on their families because they can no longer stand the pressure.

From their youth, men are also indoctrinated with the belief that it is unmanly to show emotion, because "good soldiers don't cry." Later in life, a man may find himself totally incapable of emotion because "we taught him that feelings were improper for him," Sister Chittister remarked.

Patriarchal society fails to incorporate such beneficial feminine characteristics as sensitivity, self-expression and sense of identity outside of work, and ability to form relationships.

"Patriarchy costs men something awful, and the minute they find out about that, it will be over in five minutes," she quipped.

But until men come to that minute of revelation, women must take steps toward achieving a non-sexist society. Sister Chittister urged her audience to:

- Support women. "I don't think we can just keep putting money in the collection basket. I think we have to contribute to parish day care, educational opportunities for women . . ." she said. "The Church has always taught that there are three stages of life — married, religious and single. But if women can't make enough money, they can't be single!"

- Change the mind of society by changing the language.

- Promote and employ women.

- Demand changes in curriculum and educational materials.

- Change the Church "by doing the doable." She explained that men in the Church often urge women to be patient, saying that women's ordination will come eventually. That, she said, is an excuse for not taking immediate action on areas that can be changed today — developing non-sexist liturgy, readings, etc.

- Develop a new theology of the family. Sister Chittister said studies show that joint parenting produces brighter, better-adjusted happier children. "One person in a marriage should not be sacrificed for the sake of the children," she said.

"We simply can no longer abide (the fact) that sexism is a sin and not repent it," she concluded. "Some will resist, but that's all right. The depth of the resistance is a measure of the depth of the truth."

Upstate charismatic conference scheduled for Buffalo State in July

The 1987 Upstate New York Catholic Charismatic Conference is scheduled for the State University College of New York at Buffalo from July 17 to July 19.

The theme of the conference will be "You Are To Be My Witnesses." The occasion

marks the eighth year the five upstate dioceses of Albany, Buffalo, Osgensburg, Rochester and Syracuse have joined for a time of fellowship and prayer.

The focus of this year's gathering will be to direct the power of the Holy Spirit toward

evangelistic action.

Speakers for this year's conference include Charlie Osburn and Ursula "Babsie" Bleadell. Bishop Edward D. Head of Buffalo will be present to welcome people from the upstate dioceses. Bishop Donald W. Trautman, auxiliary bishop of Buffalo, will give the homily and celebrate the closing Liturgy.

Osburn is a lay Catholic evangelist noted for his energetic style and enthusiasm. A native of Florida, Osburn has been involved in full-time ministry since 1979. He has spoken at numerous conferences throughout the United States and has been the topic of articles on evangelization that have appeared in such publications as *New Covenant* magazine.

Osburn's bishop has given full support to

his ministry, which focuses on training lay Catholics to evangelize. He has also conducted schools of evangelism on the parish level for several years.

Bleadell is largely responsible for the formation of prayer groups in Trinidad and Tobago. She has been a frequent speaker at conferences in the United States, Canada, Nigeria, Holland and Ireland.

Registration for the weekend conference is \$65 for a single room (two per room) or \$80 single (1 per room). Married couple registration is \$120; married commuter is \$75; single commuter is \$40. Meals are included in the registration fee.

The deadline for registration is July 7.

To register from the Diocese of Rochester, contact Sheila Cody, Catholic Charismatic Renewal, 34 Monica St., Rochester, 14619.

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