

## **AN OPEN LETTER TO POPE FRANCIS**

***By Maria Shriver and Joan Chittister, OSB***

Your Holiness, we are two of the more than 70 million Americans who call ourselves Catholic. We are women. One of us is a nun, and one of us is a mother of four in the final stages of divorce. We're proud and excited to welcome you on your first-ever visit to the United States.

For the past two years, we have watched alongside millions all over the world as your spiritual and, yes, your political leadership has unfolded before our eyes. At this very moment, you are in Cuba, which is experiencing the new relationship with the United States you helped facilitate. But that doesn't surprise us. We knew from the beginning of your Pontificate that you were going to be different. When you named yourself Francis after the saint who championed the poor and Mother Nature, when you said no to living in the Vatican palace, and when you said no to wearing the Prada slippers — we knew your papacy wasn't going to be business as usual.

Then you gave us hope when you said the Church has become too "obsessed" with gay marriage, abortion, and contraception, in the face of so many outstanding issues of justice and mercy. You announced that the Church should not marginalize gays. You have seen the value of American nuns, by being the first Pope in history to meet privately with officers of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious and confirming their work. By easing the way for priests to absolve women seeking forgiveness for abortion, you gave women a way to deal spiritually with this struggle. You're taking action against clergy who abuse children and bishops who protect abusers. You have called us to unite together by urging every parish, convent, and monastery to give safe harbor to refugee families. You speak out forcefully on the scientific validity of climate change. And you do so many of those things by communicating directly with us on Twitter! So anyone who thinks you're only a sweet and loving icon of compassion, empathy, and understanding — which you are — is making a big mistake. You're also a real shepherd, a Gospel-inspired leader, a model of what it means to be a follower of Jesus, and a modern maverick, all at the same time.

In fact, a brand-new Shriver Report Snapshot Poll of American Catholics out this week shows that more than three-quarters of them say your teachings match their beliefs all or most of the time. And at the same time that most Catholics see the Church itself as conservative, they see you pretty much as they see themselves. A plurality of liberals see you as liberal, a majority of moderates see you as moderate, and most conservative Catholics call you moderate or conservative. Talk about post-partisan! And even though almost 4 in 10 Catholics say there was a time in their lives when they strongly considered leaving the faith, now almost half of all Catholics say they feel more connected to the Church because of you.

Fully 86% of them agree with you that, yes, the Church should be less "obsessed" with the culture wars and more focused on income inequality and the environment. But most of the Catholics we polled go even further — calling themselves "good Catholics" while holding positions that contradict Church doctrine. They insist one can be a good

Catholic and use birth control (94%), be pro-choice (71%), get divorced (94%), have pre-marital sex (88%), or marry someone of the same sex (72%). Welcome to America! And while most of us agree with your call for a serious and more potent role for women in the Church, we Americans would do even more — a whopping 88% of us calling for women priests.

Lest you think the American pews are filled with greedy and self-centered pleasure-seekers praying at what you call “the altar of money”, our poll shows that more than 60% of us say you cannot be a good Catholic if you put personal wealth and financial gain over the well-being of others.

Pope Francis, Americans of all faiths are excited about your visit and anxious to hear what you have to say — to the U.N., to the prisoners you’ll visit, to the millions who will see you celebrate Mass, to the Joint Session of Congress. And by the way, during that speech, there will be two Catholic men seated right behind you: the Republican Speaker of the House and the Democratic Vice President. During this Presidential election year, it will be interesting to note if both of them ever stand up and applaud you for the same thing at the same time! And speaking of politics, four Catholics are running for President. And amazingly, a third of those we polled still believe a Catholic President would be beholden first to the Vatican, and only then to the will of the American people. Young people especially think that. Maybe you can clear that up for them.

And while you’re at it, maybe you can shed some light on what the 21st-century Church will look like. You’ve proclaimed an upcoming Jubilee Year of Mercy. Might that mercy ever be extended to divorced Catholics who want to remarry in the Church and take Communion, without getting an annulment? Might that mercy ever be extended to gay couples who want to be married in the eyes of God? Might that mercy be extended to those who choose birth control over having another child they can’t afford? Might that mercy be extended to women who feel called to celebrate the Eucharist?

Those of us who might have felt like second-class citizens and even unwelcome in the Catholic Church are feeling hope today. We understand that you adhere to Church teachings and doctrines, but we also know that you’re capable of raising the hard questions and listening to new perspectives on them, to hearing as well as judging, to being merciful and just, rather than simply strict. So we hope you’ll continue letting the light shine through the stained-glass windows — guiding more of us back into the pews than are running out the front door. So many Catholics are waiting for the Church to be one community again.

Your Holiness, in a recent interview, you said, “I hope Americans pray for me.” Well, we Americans hope you pray for us, because we need it. Millions of us are struggling financially, physically, emotionally, morally, spiritually — especially millions of women and children. We are looking to you, we are waiting to hear your words. We welcome you with open arms, open minds, and open hearts.

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