

POPE JOAN II

by **Pat Montley**

SYNOPSIS

Urged by apparitions of her namesakes Saint Joan and the apocryphal 9th-century Pope Joan I, and armed with an infusion of the Life Force, Sister Joan—faster than a speeding angel, more powerful than a prayer, able to leap clerical hierarchies in a single bound—blackmails her way to becoming pope, so she can fight the never-ending battle for truth, justice, gender equality, and the American way by transforming the Catholic Church into a liberal democracy and saving the world from overpopulating.

CAST OF CHARACTERS (4f, 1 m)

Sister Joan—mid-40's. An efficient and creative organizer, champion of the poor and oppressed; a reluctant reformer, but once called, committed to action. She does not wear a habit or veil—which is unfortunate since she has no sense of style or concern for appearance. She wears Birkenstocks with socks.

Saint Joan—19, a coach/cheerleader with radical ideas, French charm and a French accent

Sister Katherine—late 60's, Sister Joan's aunt; elected leader of America's Catholic nuns; a hopeful, determined liberal

Henry Cardinal Gardner—early 70's, an expert in moral theology, Prefect of the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith; a persistent conservative

Pope Joan I / Joan Shakespeare, ageless, any race; can be trans. A practical (i.e., unscrupulous) 9th-century pre-cursor of Machiavelli with a sense of humor and a Joan-Rivers delivery

SETTING

The action takes place in 2014, over a ten-month period.

Various locations in the U.S. and the Vatican

(Unit set + video images)

SCRIPT HISTORY

Pope Joan II was written with the support of a \$10,000 RUBYS grant from the Deutsch Foundation and given a professional reading at Rep Stage in Columbia, MD. Based on its submission to the State Arts Council, the playwright was given an Individual Artist Award. The play was an expansion of the author's one-act *The Woman of Destiny*, which won the T.F. Evans Award sponsored by the Shaw Society of London and was given a professional reading there.

POPE JOAN II

Act I

Scene 1:

A late night in 2014. SISTER JOAN's bedroom in Baltimore. A chair and small table next to it. On it: a book or two, a water bottle. SISTER JOAN is at prayer. Thich Nhat Hanh's The Energy of Prayer is open against her chest. She prays, nods off, wakes up, nods off. There is a sudden flash of bright, white light, a loud clatter. SAINT JOAN appears in full armor. SISTER JOAN wakes up.

SISTER JOAN

Oh!

SAINT JOAN

Bonjour, ma Soeur! Greetings, Sister Joan.

SISTER JOAN

Omygod, you're—

SAINT JOAN

(Removing helmet.)

C'est moi!

(Gesturing to her costume.)

It's over the top, I know. But it gives me cred.

SISTER JOAN

What are you doing here?

SAINT JOAN

You American sisters are in big trouble, *n'est-ce pas?*

SISTER JOAN

The bishops are ticked because we're agitating for the ordination of women. They say we're promoting "radical feminist ideas."

SAINT JOAN

The new "witches." Beware the stake.

SISTER JOAN

So you've come to warn against—

SAINT JOAN

Against giving in and giving up. There is work to be done.

SISTER JOAN

(To herself.)

Joanie! Stop talking to yourself.

(To SAINT JOAN.)

You're just a brain fart, right?

(SAINT JOAN pinches her.)

Ouch!

(SAINT JOAN pinches her again.)

OUCH!

(SAINT JOAN moves to pinch her again but

SISTER JOAN pulls away.)

OK, OK! Have you...done this before?

SAINT JOAN

I was called by Sojourner Truth, Susan B. Anthony, Margaret Sanger, Gloria Steinem—most of the famous American warrior women this side of the Middle Ages. *Et maintenant—tu!*

SISTER JOAN

I'm no Sojourner Truth.

SAINT JOAN

Mais oui—you are. You have been a champion of the poor and oppressed for twenty-five years.

SISTER JOAN

I'm not doing any more than—

SAINT JOAN

Mon amie!—you have founded a dozen good-Samaritan projects on the East Coast alone: St. Luke's Clinic in Boston, Susanna's Shelter in New York, Casa de la Esperanza in Baltimore....

SISTER JOAN

Were you...sent?

SAINT JOAN

Called. By you.

SISTER JOAN

So you weren't sent by God?

SAINT JOAN

I am going over God's head. Or rather, you are—by calling me. Do you want to talk about that? Having a *petite* crisis, eh?

SISTER JOAN

Well...my, uh, faith is...going through...an adjustment.

SAINT JOAN

What exactly is being tweaked?

SISTER JOAN

My definition of...the divine.

SAINT JOAN

Which is...?

SISTER JOAN

Bigger.

SAINT JOAN

Bigger than the creator-ruler of the universe?

SISTER JOAN

Bigger than the deity-person we have created in our own image and then super-sized.

SAINT JOAN

So not a personal god?

SISTER JOAN

Just now—though I'm still evolving—I'm taken with Einstein's idea that—

SAINT JOAN

—that G equals more than mankind squared?

SISTER JOAN

—that the religion of the future will have to be a cosmic religion, transcending any personal god and avoiding dogma.

SAINT JOAN

Mon Dieu! Then why have you stuck with a religion that embraces a personal god and wallows in dogma?

SISTER JOAN

Because I don't think it matters what we believe—only how we behave. And my church supports the behaviors that express my belief: that we must take care of one another.

SAINT JOAN

But don't all religions support that? Why not find a more compatible one? Or free-lance?

SISTER JOAN

Catholic Charities is a huge global relief system already in place. Besides, my sisters sustain me. It's my tribe.

SAINT JOAN

Do you still go to mass?

SISTER JOAN

Of course. It's a celebration of one of the world's greatest social workers.

SAINT JOAN

And you pray?

SISTER JOAN

I send loving kindness to all beings—like the Buddhists.

SAINT JOAN

In my day they would have called all this heresy—and lit the fire.

SISTER JOAN

Happily I live in a more enlightened Church.

SAINT JOAN

Pas du tout! The cathedrals of Europe are empty—and the U.S. following suit. The Church is hemorrhaging—and for good reason. It's downright embarrassing, Joan. People are fed up with a pampered, medieval hierarchy out of touch with the modern world, with archaic dogma and the self-righteous claim to infallibility, with a hypocritical, male, "celibate" clergy telling them how to behave in their bedrooms. There are pressing problems: Rome fiddles while the world burns! The fiery apocalypse has begun—and humans are responsible. Global warming—fueled by overpopulation!

SISTER JOAN

(Shaken, eager to help.)

Tell me what to do!

SAINT JOAN

Be an agent of change. Save the Church! Save the world!

SISTER JOAN

How?

SAINT JOAN

We need a new pope.

SISTER JOAN

We have a new pope. And he's—

SAINT JOAN

Cleaning up the Vatican Bank? Discarding some papal pomp? Nagging the capitalists? Jumping onto the environmental bandwagon? *Oui, oui.* But he's merely the voice crying in the wilderness... preparing the way.

SISTER JOAN

The way for—?

SAINT JOAN

The next pope.

SISTER JOAN

But how will any pope solve these problems?

SAINT JOAN

How would you?

SISTER JOAN

Well...maybe start with changing the way the Church is run? Give the people more power?

SAINT JOAN

C'est bien! Go on...

SISTER JOAN

Hmm...at the base of most overpopulation is poverty. And...the way out of poverty is... education.

SAINT JOAN

Education and...?

(SISTER JOAN knows the answer, but is reluctant.)

Go ahead, say it—there is no one here but us.

SISTER JOAN

Contraception?

SAINT JOAN

So we are right on mission—for the Education part!

SISTER JOAN

If only we could replicate world-wide the parochial school system that educated millions of American children.

SAINT JOAN

The Church has long tentacles.

SISTER JOAN

You think a pope could get people to have a smaller carbon footprint?

SAINT JOAN

And...fewer feet.

SISTER JOAN

Population control will be a hard sell. The conservatives have had their way in the Church for over fifty years.

SAINT JOAN

More like fifteen hundred.

(SISTER JOAN shrugs agreement.)

“Family planning” has a more inviting ring. And anyway, Church teaching just needs to catch up with practice. Eighty percent of Catholic women in the West already use contraception.

SISTER JOAN

Yeah, but not in Africa and South America.

SAINT JOAN

With development, they will follow. But there isn’t time to wait! The world population has almost quadrupled in just the last hundred years. Soon—very soon—there won’t be enough food or water or clean air. Just think what a progressive pope could achieve.

SISTER JOAN

But where would the money come from to—?

SAINT JOAN

What if the Vatican sold its buildings: St. Peter’s, the Papal Palace? Or think what the Museum’s artwork alone would bring: the Caravaggio, the DaVinci, the Raphaels. And what if all the cardinals and bishops the world over lived like...well—

SISTER JOAN

Like nuns?

SAINT JOAN

(Points a “you-got-it!” at her.)

We could use the money to finance massive sex education. Condoms for every community. A Rubber Revolution!

SISTER JOAN

Wait! What are you saying? This is absurd. Now I see why saints are always accused of having their heads in the clouds.

SAINT JOAN

And I'm telling you: the view from the clouds is terrifying. Time is running out. The Church—the World—needs to be saved. And you are just the one to do it.

SISTER JOAN

Me?!

SAINT JOAN

You will be the next pope.

SISTER JOAN

I don't think I'd make a convincing cross-dresser.

SAINT JOAN

Non, non, none of that nonsense. Didn't work the last time.

SISTER JOAN

What then?

SAINT JOAN

Start with the red hat. There is precedent for lay cardinals... generally someone who...has given a lifetime of service.

SISTER JOAN

But I'm only forty-f—

SAINT JOAN

And have already given a lifetime of service to the poor.

SISTER JOAN

No more than my sisters.

SAINT JOAN

C'est pas vrai!—You are the Queen of Social Services. You provide the Church with its most effective PR. How could you not qualify?

SISTER JOAN

I'm not good enough.

SAINT JOAN

Your sisters would not agree

SISTER JOAN

I'm critical and impatient and demanding and—

SAINT JOAN

—generous and tireless and determined.

SISTER JOAN

The pope has to be a priest.

SAINT JOAN

(Waving away this obstacle.)

It's 2014! A simple dispensation....

SISTER JOAN

Why don't you ask Sister Katherine? She's much better qualified.

SAINT JOAN

She's an academic. We want a social worker. People listen to someone with experience in the trenches.

SISTER JOAN

No, no, no. I must be dreaming. Time to wake up!

(Slapping herself.)

Wake up, Joanie!

(Indicating SAINT JOAN.)

This is what I get for eating curried tofu and double chocolate brownies at bedtime.

(Collapses onto her knees in repentance.)

But it was so late and I was so hungry. You see how weak-willed I am. This is all too preposterous. You are not real. Are you?

SAINT JOAN

Certainement.

SISTER JOAN

Prove it.

SAINT JOAN

What would you like?

SISTER JOAN

A burning bush would do.

SAINT JOAN

I would rather not...play with fire. But I could give you water.

(Snaps her fingers. Sound of an ear-piercing clap of thunder, a downpour, a flash of lightning.)

SISTER JOAN

What if it was going to storm anyway?

SAINT JOAN

(A gimme-a-break look. Then...)

Hand me that water bottle.

(SISTER JOAN hands it to her. SAINT JOAN shakes it, then returns it. SISTER JOAN takes a sip, reacts positively, then takes another sip, smiles approvingly.)

SAINT JOAN *(Cont.)*

Château Lafite, 1787.

SISTER JOAN

Look, this is all very...flattering. But I can't be pope. I mean...I don't have time to be pope. And I don't want to be pope.

SAINT JOAN

Don't be selfish, Sister Joan. You know you live to benefit others.

SISTER JOAN

But I don't feel called to be pope.

SAINT JOAN

(Indicating herself and the situation.)

What do you think this is?

SISTER JOAN

I respectfully reject your offer: I am unfit for such a mission.

SAINT JOAN

Au contraire, Ma Soeur. You will be imbued by the Life Force to be the Superwoman!

SISTER JOAN

The who?

SAINT JOAN

George Bernard Shaw's idea.

SISTER JOAN

The playwright?

SAINT JOAN

And prophet...who, like you, "adjusted" the definition of the divine. He believed the Life Force is an impersonal but creative Will that directs all living things to higher forms. The Superwoman is an advanced human being, a contemplative spirit, who tries to raise all humanity to her level.

SISTER JOAN

Oh, I am so not what you're looking for.

SAINT JOAN

You are *exactement* what the world needs at this critical crossroads. And it's good you have no delusions about yourself. This will enable you to accomplish what fuzzy-headed idealists could not. Don't you see? You have the two criteria: willingness to serve a Higher Force and heroic energy.

SISTER JOAN

(Sitting back on her heels.)

I'm not feeling very energetic right now.

SAINT JOAN

Embrace your Destiny and your energy will surge. Your free spirit will rise above conventional morality, put on the helmet of urgency, the armor of renewal, and do what is necessary.

SISTER JOAN

What might that be?

SAINT JOAN

We don't know yet. But I'm sure you will be up to the task.

SISTER JOAN

How can you be sure?

SAINT JOAN

The Life Force has chosen you—to be used for a mighty purpose.

(Formally, Angel Gabriel to Mary.)

Hail, Sister Joan, blessed art thou among women!

SISTER JOAN

(Jumping up.)

Stop it!

SAINT JOAN

You've got the mission. You've got the caring heart.

(Beat.)

You've got the connections.

SISTER JOAN

What connections could I possibly have?

SAINT JOAN

Ask. Your. Mother.

SISTER JOAN

My mother died three years ago.

SAINT JOAN

Joan, Joan, Joan.... There are stories to be told.

SISTER JOAN

And believe me, I've heard them all.

SAINT JOAN

Not. Quite. All.

SISTER JOAN

What do you mean?

SAINT JOAN

*(Puts a hand on SISTER JOAN's shoulder, gently
pushing her to a kneeling position.)*

And now...prepare to receive the Life Force!

(Draws her sword.)

SISTER JOAN

(Attempting to shield herself.)

Wait! You can't just...I'm not the one you wa—

*(SAINT JOAN touches SISTER JOAN's shoulder with
her sword.)*

SISTER JOAN *(Cont.)*

Nooooooooooooooooo!!

*(There is a sudden flash of bright fireworks. SISTER
JOAN collapses. A loud clatter of armor. Blackout.
Music: recording of Joan Baez singing "We Shall
Overcome" carries over to next scene.)*

Scene 2:

The next day. A blighted urban neighborhood in Philadelphia. The Spartan but cozy office of SISTER KATHERINE.

SISTER JOAN

(Coming out of an embrace.)

How was Rome? Your meeting with the Cardinal?

SISTER KATHERINE

Claims he can't keep the Vatican from putting the screws on the American Alliance of Nuns if we don't stop agitating for women's ordination.

SISTER JOAN

You must be so disappointed, Aunt Kitty. I know you had your hopes up.

SISTER KATHERINE

I thought Henry Gardner was one I could reason with. He was a liberal, you know, back in the day of Vatican Two. But what about you, Joanie? And this wonderful surprise visit?

SISTER JOAN

(Tentative.)

Aunt Kitty...

SISTER KATHERINE

Hmm?

SISTER JOAN

What happens when you pray?

SISTER KATHERINE

Uh, I guess...I usually feel better.

SISTER JOAN

Do you ever get...a response?

SISTER KATHERINE

(Chuckling.)

You mean like hearing voices?

SISTER JOAN

Well...yeah.

SISTER KATHERINE

(Seeing that SISTER JOAN is serious.)

Sometimes...if I'm trying to process a problem, a way of handling it becomes clear.

SISTER JOAN

Does the...way of handling it ever...scare you?

SISTER KATHERINE

What is it, Joanie? Has something happened to you?

SISTER JOAN

Last week...I...had a vision.

(No response.)

While I was praying.

(No response.)

Or maybe sleeping.

SISTER KATHERINE

(Relieved.)

So...it was a dream? About what?

SISTER JOAN

About becoming pope.

SISTER KATHERINE

(Laughing.)

Now that's what you call a pipe dream! And I thought your mom and I were the only ones in the family who ever toked.

SISTER JOAN

It was about making changes in the Church to save the world through education and contraception and about being Superwoman—imbued with the Life Force for a mighty purpose and embracing my destiny because I've got a mission.

SISTER KATHERINE

Wow. I wish I could help you, Honey. Maybe...maybe you should see a therapist...about your dream...what it might mean.

SISTER JOAN

Well, the "mission" was pretty clear. It's just the details of how to accomplish it that....

SISTER KATHERINE

This is so unlike you, Joanie. You've always been a feet-on-the-ground, sensible sort of person.

SISTER JOAN

I know. I'm boring.

SISTER KATHERINE

Efficient, unflappable. It's why you've been able to accomplish so much. The Mayor of

SISTER KATHERINE (*Cont.*)

Boston, the CEO at Morgan Chase Bank, even the owner of the Ravens—they all give you big bucks because they get tired of listening to you nag and whine, especially in the media. It works like a charm. And you do it all without fireworks.

SISTER JOAN

Until now.

SISTER KATHERINE

And now...do you feel any different?

SISTER JOAN

Well, to be honest—and I know this is preposterous—but I find myself getting excited about...

SISTER KATHERINE

About what?

SISTER JOAN

About all the good that could be done with the Vatican's money.

SISTER KATHERINE

And you think this...this targeted daydreaming is the doing of...some...Life Force?

SISTER JOAN

That's what Saint Joan said.

SISTER KATHERINE

St. Joan!

(*Beat.*)

And how is your rise to the papacy to be...orchestrated?

SISTER JOAN

I start as a cardinal. Did you know that you don't have to be a bishop—or even a priest—to be named a cardinal? In 1968, Pope Paul VI offered the Cardinal's hat to the French philosopher Jacques Maritain.

SISTER KATHERINE

Maritain was the pope's friend and mentor. Who's going to nominate you?

SISTER JOAN

It seems I have "connections."

SISTER KATHERINE

What connections?

SISTER JOAN

Saint Joan said: “Ask. Your. Mother. She is a woman who understands destiny.”

SISTER KATHERINE

Oh.

SISTER JOAN

What’s the matter?

SISTER KATHERINE

You heard that? From St. Joan?

SISTER JOAN

I figured she must mean my spiritual mother. From the time I was a little girl, I always wanted to be like you, Aunt Kitty. You were—are—the most brilliant, creative person I’ve ever known. Everyone—

SISTER KATHERINE

Please don’t—

SISTER JOAN

Everyone loves and respects you. That’s why you were elected leader of the Alliance of—

SISTER KATHERINE

Joanie, I—

SISTER JOAN

It’s true! At Clarke none of my other teachers were anywhere near as charismatic. You called for a “Christianity without religion,” for demythologizing scripture, and recognizing that God is not a personal being but the Ground of Being. You made theology seem like...poetry. The others droned on about Church history or proofs of the existence of God. But you found God in novels and films: *The Stranger*, *The Brothers Karamazov*, *The Seventh Seal*. You were so...*human*.

(*Beat.*)

SISTER KATHERINE

I am more human than you think.

SISTER JOAN

What...do you mean? ... Aunt Kitty?

SISTER KATHERINE

You were much on my mind in Rome, Joanie. One day I found myself on the Aventino—though I had no reason to be—in front of the Basilica of Sant’Alessio. There is a statue there of Joan of Arc—

SISTER JOAN

My patron saint.

SISTER KATHERINE

—at the stake. It's quite modern. The stylized flames lick her feet, yet her face is accepting, or perhaps determined...certain of her role. I found it both disturbing and comforting. I didn't know what had brought me there, yet I could not turn away.

SISTER JOAN

Maybe it was...a sign.

SISTER KATHERINE

Come sit down, Joanie. There is something I hoped never to have to tell you. But I think now I must.

(SISTER JOAN sits next to SISTER KATHERINE who looks at her, drinking in her innocence and affection as though for the last time.)

SISTER JOAN

What is it?

SISTER KATHERINE

When I was still in my twenties, I fell in love with a handsome, young priest who was my teacher. I had entered the convent at seventeen so didn't have...much experience of men. When he...paid attention to me, I...I was surprised. And, I guess, flattered. We started going to campus events together: a Buffy St. Marie concert, a Fellini film festival. Even took a bus trip to DC for a Vietnam War protest. When I was with him, I...he made me feel that I was more...alive—and the world around me more dazzling—than ever before. Everything seemed...intense.... We were heady with...possibilities. We plotted and argued into the night about how we could make the Church a force for justice and love in the world.

(Beat.)

One night we decided to start with ourselves...and we made love.

SISTER JOAN

But you...you must have...what about...?

SISTER KATHERINE

My vows? Yes, I did feel guilty. But I also felt—isn't it what we always tell ourselves—that God understood. That something that felt so right couldn't be bad. Even that God had brought us together. Haven't you ever done that—used a loving God to justify doing something you loved dangerously more than God?

SISTER JOAN

I...I've never broken my vow.

SISTER KATHARINE

Or been tempted?

(SISTER JOAN acknowledges "yes" with a gesture.)

Then you know—it's a hard place to be.

SISTER JOAN

How long...did it go on?

SISTER KATHERINE

A few months... until I realized I was pregnant.

SISTER JOAN

Oh!

SISTER KATHERINE

I had the baby. A beautiful, healthy, amazing little girl.

(Beat.)

And I gave her to my sister to raise.

(SISTER JOAN pulls back, dumbstruck. SISTER KATHERINE holds her gaze, until SISTER JOAN slowly gets up, crosses the room, trying to take in what she has just heard. Long pause.)

SISTER JOAN

But how did you manage to...?

SISTER KATHERINE

When I was starting to show, I told my superior that Bessie was gravely ill and asked if I could go to Iowa...to take care of her. Everyone admired my sisterly devotion. I stayed at the farm until after you were born. When I returned, no one even suspected.... Lie upon shameful lie.

SISTER JOAN

But you could've... Why?! Why didn't you leave the convent and raise me yourself?

SISTER KATHERINE

Because I was a stupid, selfish coward. Though I didn't admit it then. I told myself I couldn't possibly raise you alone; that I wouldn't be able to provide for you; that my disgrace would be passed onto you and you would be shamed; that Bessie would be a much better mother; that she and Jim would provide a more stable, loving home than I ever could.

SISTER JOAN

And now?

SISTER KATHERINE

I...I suppose I still think that's all true. But now I know other reasons were equally responsible.

SISTER JOAN

What other reasons?

SISTER KATHERINE

When I was growing up, I never imagined myself a mother. I never played with dolls...or even had a pet. I thought your Grandma Clare—and all my housewife aunts—had boring, constricted lives. The nuns who were my teachers seemed so much more exciting. Instead of devoting themselves to the care of a few children of their own, they dedicated their lives to the education of hundreds—even thousands—and were able to have a life of the mind. I tasted that life, savored it—and wanted no part of motherhood.

(Beat.)

And then you came along. Giving birth to you was the most powerful experience I've ever had. And seeing your little face for the first time was the most ecstatic moment I've ever lived. And suddenly, passionately, I wanted nothing more than to be a mother to you.

SISTER JOAN

Then why didn't you, dammit?!

(No response.)

And my father—what about my father?!

SISTER KATHERINE

He was just at the start of a very promising career in the Church. Had done his seminary training in Belgium and Rome, written a wildly successful book on the Second Vatican Council that gave him instant status in theological circles. You and I were not in his picture.

SISTER JOAN

Does he know...about me?

SISTER KATHERINE

No.

SISTER JOAN

You could have made it known that he was...the father.

SISTER KATHERINE

I'm ashamed to admit it now—I wanted that career for him too. All the things we had dreamed of together to make the Church a force for justice and love in the world—I believed he could play a critical role in making them happen—because he was a man, a gifted priest. I didn't want to stand in the way of that.

SISTER JOAN

And what about you?

SISTER KATHERINE

Pride. Stupid, blind pride in my own inconsequential talents. So I let him persuade me that even though a woman, I too was destined to be a leader—a big fish in the small pond of an order of nuns. And we both solemnly promised each other—and God—we would not leave religious life...and we would never betray our secret.

SISTER JOAN

But you...you're breaking that promise now. Why?

SISTER KATHERINE

Because your father is your... "connection."

SISTER JOAN

Tell me who he is!

(SISTER KATHERINE crosses to her desk, takes a simple black binder from the top drawer. From a pocket inside the cover, she removes a yellowed envelope. She hands the binder to SISTER JOAN, who starts going through it.)

SISTER JOAN (Cont.)

A photo album? Is he in here?

(Pages through it frantically.)

They're all just...pictures of me.

SISTER KATHERINE

You have been on my mind and in my heart every day of my life since you were born, Joanie. You were my Life Force. I was compelled to work for the good of others to try to make up for the cowardice of giving you away.

SISTER JOAN

(Sarcastic.)

What a saint you are!

SISTER KATHERINE

It was impossible, I know, but—

SISTER JOAN

Damn right it was impossible! Where were you? Where were you? I was your responsibility. Your daughter. Yours!

SISTER KATHERINE

I'm sorry, Joanie. I'm so sorry.

SISTER JOAN

You gave me away!

SISTER KATHERINE

I tried to be...part of your life.

SISTER JOAN

A mother isn't part of your life—she is your life.

SISTER KATHERINE

I understand your anger.

SISTER JOAN

No you don't! You weren't abandoned by your mother. She devoted her “boring, constricted life” to nurturing yours.

SISTER KATHERINE

I wanted to be there as much as I could so I —

SISTER JOAN

How unselfish of you.

SISTER KATHERINE

—so I applied to teach at Clarke so I could be near you growing up. I wanted to know you...to have the chance to love you.

SISTER JOAN

So you periodically swept into my life like some Auntie Mame—taught me to play bridge, do the moon walk, make chocolate mousse. Made me love you more than anyone in the world...and then swept out.

SISTER KATHERINE

I know there's nothing I can say to—

SISTER JOAN

You could say...you could say you wish you hadn't given me away. You could say you regret it.

(Beat. A crack in the anger?)

Do you?

SISTER KATHERINE

How can I—when I see what you have become? When I see that the child of Bessie and Jim has become a woman of such spiritual strength, such great-hearted generosity, such passion for justice, how can I possibly wish her growing up had been otherwise?

SISTER JOAN

I fantasized about the “otherwise.” Growing up. I used to imagine what it would be like to have you for a mother.

SISTER KATHERINE

But Bessie was a—

SISTER JOAN

Selfless, loving mother. Yes. In my fantasies, she was always a dear, adored aunt.

SISTER KATHERINE

And Jim?

SISTER JOAN

Was always my dad. The man with the hopeful, generous heart who taught me to trust people. There were no competing uncles around.

SISTER KATHERINE

And what was the different life you imagined for us?

SISTER JOAN

(With building emotion.)

We lived in downtown Dubuque. So instead of doing farm chores, you and I went to Spiderwoman Feminist Theatre and to art festivals where people danced in the street to Madonna and Bruce Springsteen. We joined the Midtown Singers and wore matching royal blue dresses and Dad would come and see us perform and be so proud. But sometimes we just stayed home and wrote novels together, taking turns with the paragraphs, or we watched “Dinner at Julia’s” on TV and tried to make Beef Bourguignon. And Aunt Bessie would come and we’d serve it and she’d “oo” and “ah.” And you were a teacher, so you had off in the summers and dad wasn’t a farmer, so we’d take vacations to New York city and climb to the top of the Statue of Liberty and cry for the immigrants and eat pizza at Mama Leone’s and see *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat* on Broadway....

(She runs out of steam. Beat.)

SISTER KATHERINE

How long before you figured out that Auntie Mame might not make a very good every-day mom?

SISTER JOAN

By that time I was at Clarke...and under your teacher-spell.

SISTER KATHERINE

Joanie...can you ever...

(Beat.)

Whatever you decide to do...about your vision, I will support you with all my heart.

SISTER JOAN

(Referring to photo album.)

What did you take out of the binder?

SISTER KATHERINE

(Holding it up.)

A letter from your father.

SISTER JOAN

You said he didn't know about me.

SISTER KATHERINE

He wrote it to me. A long time ago.

(She hands the envelope to SISTER JOAN, who slowly turns it in her hands, then finally gives SISTER KATHERINE a withering look.)

SISTER KATHERINE *(Cont.)*

I'll be...in the next room...if you want me.

(She exits. SISTER JOAN watches her leave, then sets the album aside and opens the one-page letter, which contains a business card and a check. She looks closely at these two, then reads the letter, looks up from it, taking in with devastating, mixed emotions what she has just read, then slides to her knees in tears, letting the letter and its contents fall to the floor. There is a sudden flash of bright, white light and the sound of huge church bells joyously ringing. POPE JOAN I appears in full papal regalia. SISTER JOAN looks up, frightened, her mouth agape.)

POPE JOAN I

Shut your muzzle—I'm not a dentist. I'm a pope. Pope Joan.

(With innuendo.)

The First.

SISTER JOAN I

I...I thought you were a myth.

POPE JOAN I

That's what the boys in red want you to think.

SISTER JOAN

So...there really was a woman pope?

POPE JOAN I

In the ninth century, Rome was a pretty wild place: sleazy monks, conniving cardinals, Vatican violence, intrigue, corruption, drama, drama, drama. A lot like now.

SISTER JOAN

But how did you manage to...?

(Gestures to her own breasts.)

POPE JOAN I

Come on! All the smart girls were doing it. Only way to get out of the scullery and into school. Dozens of girls who dressed like boys even grew up to be canonized.

SISTER JOAN

I never read that in *Lives of the Saints*.

POPE JOAN I

All censored. Trust me.

SISTER JOAN

Is it true you had a lover?

POPE JOAN I

Who didn't?

SISTER JOAN

And you got pregnant?

POPE JOAN I

Nah, nah. My diaphragm might have been primitive, but that half-a-lemon-rind did the job!

SISTER JOAN

What about the papal procession when you suddenly went into labor and were stoned to death?

POPE JOAN I

Never happened. I was smothered in my bed—with the boyfriend. By three corpulent cardinals: Gorgonzola to keep watch and Asiago and Mozzarella with the pillows.

SISTER JOAN

Because they discovered you were a woman?

POPE JOAN I

Worse. I was a reformer. I wanted to get the papacy out of the Emperor's pocket. And I wanted to get some gals involved in running the Church. But the guys didn't want any parts of it.

SISTER JOAN

Still don't.

POPE JOAN I

So you got your work cut out for you, Joanie.

SISTER JOAN

I don't really know if I can do this. I mean I've just found out my aunt is my mother and I need some time to—

POPE JOAN I

Get over yourself. We don't have time for shock trauma treatment. You got a mission. And now you got a "connection."

SISTER JOAN

That's just it. I'm not sure how to proceed...with my...connection.

POPE JOAN I

Leave it to me to help with the strategy. And to make sure you don't cave in to compassion when it comes to turning the screws.

SISTER JOAN

That doesn't sound like a very...ethical approach.

POPE JOAN I

What did we tell you? The Superwoman has to rise above conventional morality to do what is necessary.

SISTER JOAN

But I'm not a Superwoman!

POPE JOAN I

Listen to me: It's your destiny! Now shape up. And for Pete's sake, get a new pair of shoes. Even Jesus wouldn't wear socks with his sandals.

(SISTER JOAN hides one foot behind the other.

POPE JOAN I lets out an exasperated breath.)

You know what I think? I think it's time for you to get recharged. What you need is a booster shot of the Life Force.

(As POPE JOAN I makes the sign of the cross over

SISTER JOAN, there is a sudden flash of bright fireworks, during which...)

SISTER JOAN

(This time, accepting it, then enjoying it.)

Ah! Ah! Ah! Ah! Ah! Ah! Ah! Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaah !!

(The sound of huge church bells joyously ringing.

This is drowned out by the sound of a jet plane taking off. Blackout.)

Scene 3:

A week later. The Vatican. HENRY CARDINAL GARDNER's office.

HENRY

I assume you have a recommendation for this woman cardinal who “won’t rock the boat.”

SISTER JOAN

Me.

HENRY

You?!

SISTER JOAN

First: I’m a nun. It’ll make the nuns feel like they have a representation in running the Church and thus get *them* out of your hair. Two: I’m not an academic—don’t write books extolling liberal theology that might prove an embarrassment down the road. All I do is—

HENRY

Feed the hungry, shelter the homeless, visit the sick and imprisoned.

(She is surprised he knows this.)

You don’t think you’d get an appointment without a background check?

SISTER JOAN

Then you know: I know my place—and it’s mostly in rooms with stoves and beds.

HENRY

You’re a regular Mother Theresa.

SISTER JOAN

Only spunkier. And I’ve done it all before hitting fifty.

HENRY

What if you have a mid-life crisis and reverse course?

SISTER JOAN

Why would I do that once I have the authority that comes with the red hat?

HENRY

What authority?

SISTER JOAN

Say...a position in the Vatican Office of Catholic Charities?

HENRY

Where you wouldn’t make waves?

SISTER JOAN

What would be the point? The current policies are safe in the hands of the conservative majority.

HENRY

If you're going to be so well-behaved, what's in it for you?

SISTER JOAN

Publicity for my works of mercy. I'll be in the spotlight. Governors and business leaders will want to make themselves look good by contributing to my pet projects. You see, I really am committed to my...mission.

HENRY

What puzzles me is that nothing in your file suggests this kind of...cocky ambition.

SISTER JOAN

Let's just say I've been...revitalized.

HENRY

And how do you imagine the pope will respond to my nominating you?

SISTER JOAN

The time has come and he knows it. You could be his hero. You're just the one to do the Canon-Law acrobatics justifying it.

HENRY

Well, Sister...your arguments are curious if not cogent.

(Ushering her towards the door.)

I will give your proposal my deepest consideration.

(SISTER JOAN turns back, faces him, sees he has no intention of granting her request.)

SISTER JOAN

Sister Katherine...gave me your letter.

HENRY

What letter?

SISTER JOAN

Here's a copy. You can imagine how fragile the original is. We wouldn't want anything to happen to it.

HENRY

(Perusing it.)

This...letter means nothing to me.

SISTER JOAN

You don't recognize the handwriting? Or the signature?

HENRY

It's signed only "Henry."

SISTER JOAN

But the full name—the one on the check—is yours.

HENRY

(Taken aback, then grasping at straws.)

The check...was made out to Ki—to Sister Katherine. It could have been for anything.

SISTER JOAN

But it wasn't for just "anything," was it? She was meant to cash it and use the money to pay...

(Snatching the letter out of his hands, reading.)

the "trustworthy physician who understands the delicacy of the situation and could be of compassionate assistance." The one whose business card was enclosed in the letter.

(He collapses onto a chair. She folds up the letter.)

Didn't you wonder, when the check was never canceled, what had happened?

HENRY

(No place to hide.)

She was obstinate. And angry. Said she wanted me, not my money. I thought she tore it up.

SISTER JOAN

The check or the child?

HENRY

Look, I...knew what she would go through if she didn't...

SISTER JOAN

You abandoned her for your precious career.

HENRY

We...we came to...an understanding.

SISTER JOAN

You came to an understanding.

(He looks away.)

Why would you not marry her?

HENRY

I was already committed to the Church.

SISTER JOAN

The Church that forbids fornication and abortion. What unshakable commitment.

HENRY

Have you never faltered?

SISTER JOAN

We're not talking about me. It was the late sixties—the start of the great exodus of nuns and priests. Why were you not among them?

HENRY

I chose to be faithful to my Church.

SISTER JOAN

But not to your child.

HENRY

All right! What do you want me say? I was hypocritical and selfish and ambitious.

SISTER JOAN

See how easy that was? Almost as easy as writing a check.

HENRY

It was not my finest hour.

SISTER JOAN

Is that how long your concern lasted? How long did you wait to go to confession and get your soul scraped clean? Long enough for the doctor's visit to be over so you could afford repentance? Have you never wondered what happened to her?

HENRY

Our duties have occasionally brought us together over the years. I've seen for myself that she is well and happy.

SISTER JOAN

And it's never come up?

HENRY

We made a solemn promise never to speak of the matter to each other or to anyone else.

SISTER JOAN

So I've heard.

HENRY

I'm...more than surprised she spoke of it to you.

SISTER JOAN

I believe she felt the circumstances justified it.

HENRY

What circumstances?

SISTER JOAN

(Beat.)

I am...Sister Katherine's daughter. And, sorry to say...yours.

HENRY

Omygod.

SISTER JOAN

How very touching to hear your first prayer uttered on my behalf, Father. Ah, how many times have you been addressed by that unearned title?

HENRY

I'm...so...sorry.

SISTER JOAN

I'm sure you are.

HENRY

No. I mean...I don't mean you aren't...it's just...I had no idea. I mean...I would have...

SISTER JOAN

Been kinder to me today? Or even more dismissive?

HENRY

I'm so sorry.

SISTER JOAN

Yes, you said that. The question is: how sorry?

HENRY

What?

SISTER JOAN

Sorry enough to admit responsibility? And the shirking of it? Sorry enough to apologize publicly? And to resign your Vatican position as head of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith?

HENRY

Is that what you want?

SISTER JOAN

No. I want you to nominate me for cardinal.

(Indicating the letter.)

As I said, the original is quite fragile. But nothing a journalist couldn't manage to read.

HENRY

You'd do that to your mother?

SISTER JOAN

It was her idea.

HENRY

You're just bluffing.

SISTER JOAN

Call me.

HENRY

No, no, stop all this! This...this is not what I want to be doing, not how I want to be talking with you. Just stop! Please. Please. Just give me a minute to...to look at you...my daughter.

(They look at each other for a beat.)

You can't imagine how many times I tortured myself thinking of how things might have worked out. How many times I envisioned...a different kind of life...a life in which you...survived and I...made a different choice. How many times I dreamed of...you. And now...here you are.

SISTER JOAN

Not what you...expected, I'm sure.

HENRY

More than I ever could have deserved.

(She looks away.)

Please...Joan...won't you...tell me about yourself. Anything from when you were...your favorite books as a child, your best subjects in school, what sports you played, the places that were special to you, the boy you took to the prom—I want to know it all.

SISTER JOAN

It's too late...for all that. You missed your chance.

HENRY

And your mother? Did she miss hers?

SISTER JOAN

Aunt Kitty and I were pen pals from the time I learned to write. She called every Sunday, came to our house for holidays and vacations.

HENRY

It must have been hard for her not to “claim” you. Did you enter the convent because of her?

SISTER JOAN

Because of the God I saw in her.

HENRY

So...you have found it in your heart to forgive her?

SISTER JOAN

The longer I talk with you, the easier it is to forgive her.

HENRY

We both failed you.

SISTER JOAN

Yes. But Aunt Kitty made sure I had a good home with two loving parents. Aunt Kitty did not drop out of my life. Aunt Kitty made sure I got to have a life.

HENRY

Joan...look, I know you're angry—

SISTER JOAN

You think?

HENRY

—and have every reason to be. But...people change.

SISTER JOAN

Do they?

HENRY

I beg for your mercy, Joan. Not because it is in my nature to deserve it, but because it is in your nature to grant it.

(Sees that he has hit a soft spot, so presses on.)

“Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.” He knew it was a lot to ask...it's why he taught us the prayer.

(Kneeling to her.)

Daughter—I know I have not earned the right to call you that. And yet, I am your flesh and blood...and I beg your forgiveness.

SISTER JOAN

(Beat. She pretends to consider this, then takes his hand.)

What might this hand have meant to me if it had held the bottle or buttoned the sweater or pushed the swing or turned the page...clapped at graduations...wiped away tears. Flesh and

SISTER JOAN (*Cont.*)

blood, yes. But father? No. The father who did those things is not you. And so...I do forgive you. It's easy to forgive strangers.

HENRY

I can never make up for all the years we...but perhaps with time we could get...better acquainted.

SISTER JOAN

Better acquainted, you and I?

(Pretends to consider this.)

You know what? I think you're right! That's a wonderful idea!

(Waves the letter, as if unaware that it's still in her hand.)

Yes! I agree. Plenty of time to do that.... Perhaps you can even show me the glories of Rome—and tell me all about life in the Vatican—

(Slaps him in the chest with the letter.)

when I am cardinal!

(They freeze. The sound of men's voices singing the Magnificat for the ceremony for the elevation of a cardinal. Lights dim. HENRY ritually robes SISTER JOAN in a cardinal's red cassock, cape, and skull cap. Lights go to full-throttle red, then out.)

Scene 4:

Six months later. The Vatican office of SISTER (now Cardinal) JOAN. Empty cardboard boxes on the floor. SISTER JOAN is finishing unpacking, sets up a statue of Buddha on a shelf under a crucifix hanging on the wall. Suddenly SAINT JOAN appears.

SAINT JOAN

About time you got around to unpacking.

SISTER JOAN

Gimme a break. I've only been a cardinal six months. I've been busy...making friends

SAINT JOAN

No time to waste, Joan. We've got to stay on mission.

(Gestures for her to recite her mission.)

SISTER JOAN

(Mocking SAINT JOAN's military tone, stands at attention.)

Yes, General! Save the Church so it can save the World from Global Warming—by controlling population through Education and Contraception.

SAINT JOAN

But first: the papacy.

SISTER JOAN

Francis was just in here yesterday...helping me wash the windows and pry them open. He really is a sweetheart.

SAINT JOAN

Don't tell me you're questioning your call!

SISTER JOAN

I do wonder sometimes: why can't he do it?

SAINT JOAN

Save the world through contraception? Really?

SISTER JOAN

Well, maybe he could...come around on that. He has made some important changes in how the Vatican is run. And he seems so...open-minded. He's always on his phone listening to people's problems.

(POPE JOAN I appears.)

POPE JOAN I

You betcha! It's what he loves most to do. And he misses doing it. I don't think he's happy here.

SISTER JOAN

What makes you say that?

POPE JOAN I

I see him when I'm haunting the halls. He's a lost soul. Like a pauper at the country club. Doesn't know how to enjoy the Power Party.

SISTER JOAN

But that's a good thing, isn't it? He wants to change the power party into a service project.

POPE JOAN I

Yeah, but his heart's not in the job—it's someplace else.

SISTER JOAN

Where?

POPE JOAN I

He's like his patron saint, Francis—wants to live simply, hang out with the poor, give 'em a leg up. He misses it. The two of them are always commiserating.

SISTER JOAN

You've seen them together?

POPE JOAN I

(Crossing her fingers.)

They're like this.

SAINT JOAN

(To SISTER JOAN.)

You think you're the only one good enough to have
(Indicating herself and POPE JOAN I.)
apparitions?

SISTER JOAN

Of course not! I'm just...surprised. Guess I didn't realize it was so...common.

SAINT JOAN

It isn't. But it could be—if people were more...attentive.

SISTER JOAN

(Unpacking a statue of the Hindu Mother Goddess Durga.)

That sounds like something Aunt Kitty would say.

SAINT JOAN

So...you've forgiven her, have you?

SISTER JOAN

Anger is toxic. Besides, I need her.

SAINT JOAN

In your job?

SISTER JOAN

In my life. I can't imagine my life without her.

SAINT JOAN

As you say, "A mother isn't part of your life—she is your life."

SISTER JOAN

(Holding up the statue.)

The Hindus know that, don't they? Goddess Durga, Mother of the universe.

(Sets it on shelf next to Buddha, where the two statues form a trinity with the crucifix on the wall above, between them. She straightens the three objects to make the trinity symmetrical.)

POPE JOAN I

Anyway, I don't think our Francis is long for this world of pomp and privilege. In another month, don't be surprised if.... Well, I don't want to let the cat out of the bag.

(Disappears.)

SISTER JOAN

Wait!

(To POPE JOAN I.)

What did she mean?

SAINT JOAN

Better get ready, Joan. Sounds like your time is coming.

(Disappears.)

(SISTER JOAN takes a deep breath. Crossfade as this scene bleeds into the next.)

Scene 5:

A month later. Projected image: video footage of huge crowd in Vatican Square. Cheering. Image changes: a distant view of a papal figure in white on a balcony, over the crowd. Cheering subsides to background noise. We hear MALE VOICE OF TV REPORTER.

REPORTER *(Recorded.)*

In Vatican City today, Pope Francis announced that he is resigning from office to resume his direct service to poor. Appearing early this morning at the window of the Apostolic Palace, His Holiness rocked the Catholic world with his resignation, urging priests, quote, “to work amid the people in the muck of life, to be good shepherds looking for their lost sheep, to be so close to their flocks that they smell like their sheep.” Insisting that he could not expect this of others without setting the example, the pope divested himself of his papal robe, packed his well-worn, Pay-Less hiking boots, and arrived later this afternoon in the impoverished village of *El Fin de la Tierra*.

(Image changes to countryside: ragged shepherds herding flocks of scrawny sheep.)

where his flock welcomed him warmly.

(Shepherds waving. Sound effects of sheep.)

Preparations for his canonization are underway.

(Image changes to procession of cardinals in red.)

Meanwhile, the Church’s stunned cardinals have arrived in Rome to choose a successor. And the odds makers, with no heads-up from their inside sources, are scrambling to make book.

(Projection off. Lights up on...)

Scene 6:

A week later. Vatican Office of SISTER JOAN, who is setting up tea things, plugging in hot pot as SAINT JOAN watches..

SAINT JOAN

So...How is the campaign going a week into it?

SISTER JOAN

Full speed. Sister Katherine will be here shortly to help wrap it up.

SAINT JOAN

The conclave convenes today. How many votes do you need to be elected?

SISTER JOAN

Sixty-one. I have most of them.

SAINT JOAN

How did you manage that?

SISTER JOAN

Well, the liberal minority came onboard as soon as I suggested making celibacy optional. Some others are being pressured by women in their own dioceses insisting it's time. And...I'm happy to report that after he saw what I was doing with Catholic Charities, Francis himself put in a good word.

SAINT JOAN

Ah, you are too modest, *ma soeur*! What about those won over by your own personal charm?!

SISTER JOAN

(Sheepishly.)

Maybe one or two.

SAINT JOAN

And the rest? How will you get them?

SISTER JOAN

Pope Joan offered a very helpful suggestion: "Just Google 'Misbehaving Cardinals' and follow the links."

SAINT JOAN

Mon Dieu, if only we had had the Internet in my day! I'll leave you to it then. *Au revoir!*

(SAINT JOAN disappears. SISTER JOAN opens up her Notebook. SISTER KATHERINE enters with her

Notebook, stands at the door, studying SISTER JOAN.)

SISTER KATHERINE

I don't know, Joanie. Red was never your color.

SISTER JOAN

Don't worry, Aunt Kitty. Soon I'll be wearing white.

(Poised to type.)

How many more votes do I need?

SISTER KATHERINE

(Checking her own Notebook.)

Four. We better find those last four arms we can twist. Time's running out.

SISTER JOAN

Here's one. Pietro Cardinal Di Satini. Apparently smuggled in twenty-eight million Euros from Switzerland for his family's Ferrari business. I'm sending you the file now.

(Types.)

SISTER KATHERINE

(Typing.)

Got it. I'll put Sister...Endeavor on it. Forwarding...Enter!

(Sits back.)

This is going to get nasty, isn't it? Shall I make some tea?

SISTER JOAN

Water's heating. Here's another good one. Pierre Dubois, routinely accepted gifts from banks in return for investment of Vatican assets.

SISTER KATHERINE

What were the gifts?

SISTER JOAN

Trips, cruises, luxury hotels, massages...

(They both type.)

SISTER KATHERINE

How about Sister...Hercule for Pierre?

SISTER JOAN

You know best. Listen to this one. Luciano Badaccio. Stole thousands of consecrated hosts to sell to Satanic cults for black masses.

(Beat, as each ponders the preposterousness. Then...)

SISTER KATHERINE & SISTER JOAN *(Together.)*

Naaaah.

(SISTER JOAN swipes her screen. SISTER KATHERINE holds up two tins of tea.)

SISTER KATHERINE *(Cont.)*

Earl Grey or Irish Breakfast?

SISTER JOAN

Irish. Who do you think is my most serious competition?

SISTER KATHERINE

(Putting tea bags in two mugs.)

Hard to say. Francis's resignation was so sudden. Took them all by surprise. No time really to do the usual deal brokering. Who else have you got?

(Pours the tea water.)

SISTER JOAN

(Reading next one.)

Johann Georg Wolf. Spent eighteen million Euros to modernize his own residence in a poor diocese in Austria.

SISTER KATHERINE

What could possibly cost that much?

SISTER JOAN

(Scans a few pages.)

A luxury rooftop garden, an aqua-nova pool and spa modeled on the Roman baths... a cedar infrared sauna...and let's not forget "a premium, wall-mounted, no-tank, no-noise luxury toilet with hand-free hygiene. Features a heated seat and delivers a warm-water wash and warm-air dry, with adjustable temperature, pressure, and pulsation."

(Looks up.)

Who knew?

(They look at each other, trying to imagine...)

SISTER KATHERINE

(Typing.)

I'll give him to Sister Adrian.

SISTER JOAN

How many is that?

SISTER KATHERINE

Need one more.

SISTER JOAN

Okaaaay...

(Swipes screen, scans.)

SISTER JOAN (*Cont.*)

Hmm...in 2008...a diocese in the U.S. ran up a deficit of twenty-five million.

SISTER KATHERINE

How?

SISTER JOAN

Looks like...while the Celtic Tiger was raging, Cardinal Paddy McNeal speculated in real estate in his ancestral homeland, as well as in a TV outlet that turned out to be broadcasting...

(*Looks up.*)

soft-core pornography.

SISTER KATHERINE

Surely he didn't know.

SISTER JOAN

Nor would he want anyone else to.

(*SISTER JOAN clicks at her Notebook. SISTER KATHERINE hands SISTER JOAN her mug of tea.*)

SISTER KATHERINE

(*In Irish brogue.*)

May the road rise to meet us!

(*They clink mugs. HENRY bursts in.*)

HENRY

Have you gone mad? What do you think you're doing?!

SISTER KATHERINE

(*Reprimanding his bad manners.*)

Good morning, Cardinal Henry.

(*Offers him her mug.*)

Would you like some tea? We're just toasting—

(*Looks from one to the other, then, with mischief.*)

The Holy Family.

HENRY

(*Beside himself with anxiety.*)

Will you please be...

(*Whispering angrily.*)

more discrete.

SISTER KATHERINE

(Teasing, looking for hidden mics.)

Oh my! Is the office of the first woman cardinal bugged?

HENRY

(To SISTER JOAN.)

The Conclave is convening and—

SISTER JOAN

Yes, I'll be right there. Just finishing up a few things here.

HENRY

I didn't come to scold you for tardiness.

SISTER JOAN

Oh? What then?

HENRY

There is talk—from some of the unlikeliest cardinals—of casting ballots for...you!

SISTER JOAN

God works in mysterious ways.

HENRY

So does the Devil.

SISTER KATHERINE

(Tongue-in-cheek.)

Surely not in the Vatican.

HENRY

Not that either of you even acknowledges the Devil.

SISTER KATHERINE

But he does seem to be popular among those in need of a scapegoat.

HENRY

*(Throws his arms up in frustration and accidentally
bumps into statue of Buddha, rocking it on its shelf.)*

And what is this Buddha doing here?!

SISTER JOAN

(Pointing to crucifix on the wall above it.)

Keeping Jesus company.

HENRY

(To SISTER JOAN.)

What happened to the woman cardinal who wouldn't rock the boat?

SISTER JOAN

She's not rocking the boat—just cleaning out the bow.

HENRY

Who are these unidentified women who keep calling the cardinals with threats?

SISTER KATHERINE

Ah, that would be the N-FBI. Nuns For a Better Institution. And they're not "threats." Just ...gentle reminders.

HENRY

(To SISTER KATHERINE.)

I suppose this is your doing?

SISTER KATHERINE

The N-FBI? Yes. As Leader of the Alliance, I have a seasoned appreciation of our...talent pool—

HENRY

You mean your blackmailing brigade.

SISTER KATHERINE

—which it seemed only fitting to put at the disposal of Her Eminence.

HENRY

(To SISTER JOAN.)

And you. What happened to simply using the red hat to get publicity and funding for your "works of mercy"?

SISTER JOAN

Have done. My red hat got front-page coverage in the London Times, Beijing Daily, Arabian Gazette, and USA Today. As a result, the World Health Organization invited me to speak on "Gender, Equity, and Human Rights." And there was an astronomical spike in contributions to my American charities.

HENRY

So...shouldn't you be devoting your energies to them instead of being a...mafia godmother? Think about commitment to your mission.

SISTER JOAN

I am. If I can muster this much coverage as cardinal, think of the press I will get as pope.

HENRY

Beware *hubris*, Sister Joan. It will be your undoing!

SISTER JOAN

You say that almost as if you want me to be undone.

(Tongue in cheek.)

And I thought...I thought I might make you...proud.

HENRY

Proud?!

SISTER KATHERINE

He will never let himself be proud of you, Joan. Because he's jealous.

HENRY

Of what?

SISTER KATHERINE

Don't be coy, Henry. We used to joke about it all the time. How you would be the first American pope.

SISTER JOAN

You wanted to be pope?

HENRY

Just teasing. I had no such ambitions.

SISTER KATHERINE

Then why did you change, Henry? Why accept positions in Rome that took you further and further from the real work with people in need?

HENRY

Creating institutional policies is what makes the work in the field possible.

SISTER KATHERINE

How would you know? Your "fieldwork" was two years of teaching theology after ordination. Then it was off to Rome to be lackey to the head of the Inquisition.

HENRY

The Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith.

SISTER KATHERINE

Its original name was more honest.

HENRY

You know...why I left the States.

SISTER JOAN

(Looking from one to the other.)

I don't.

(They look at her. It dawns on her.)

Oh.

SISTER KATHERINE

You couldn't get far enough away, could you? If there had been a parish opening in Antarctica, you would have gone there.

HENRY

It wasn't like that.

SISTER JOAN

What was it like?

HENRY

The opportunity presented itself to...

SISTER JOAN

To what?

SISTER KATHERINE

To get a foot in the door of the halls of power.

HENRY

To serve in a capacity for which I had been well trained.

SISTER KATHERINE

And from there to climb up the ranks to the Grand Inquisitor himself, and then—

SISTER JOAN

So you did want to be pope.

HENRY

No!

SISTER JOAN

Oh, Henry—you should have had Sister Katherine for your campaign manager. She's worked miracles for me.

(The women laugh. It clears the air a bit.)

HENRY

(Sighs.)

If ever I had any illusions about family life...

SISTER KATHERINE

What? You think it would have been like this? Bickering and accusations? Fighting about politics and religion? Screaming at one another over the Mac 'n' Cheese?

SISTER JOAN

It would never have come to that, Henry. We would have saved you from yourself.

*(In the background we hear men's voices singing
Gregorian chant.)*

SISTER KATHERINE

Off you go to the Sistine Chapel. Break a leg, Joanie. And Henry—there's still time to be proud.

*(Lights dim. As the singing continues, SISTER JOAN
removes her cardinal's robe. HENRY ceremonially
robes her in a white papal cassock, cape, and skull cap.
And white Birkenstocks and socks. Then joyous ringing*

*of church bells, lights up on a series of puffs of pink smoke.
Over the bells: shouts of "Viva la Mama!" We see a quick
series of images of the front pages of world newspapers
showing a photo of SISTER JOAN in papal cassock with
headlines: "Lady Pope Elected!" "Nun Nudges Out
Competition!" "Cardinals Favor Feminist!" "Sister Sits
in Peter's Chair!" "JOAN II reigns over Vatican!" Then,
crossfade to....)*

Scene 7:

Immediately after the election. The Vatican. SISTER JOAN crosses to the edge of the stage and addresses the College of Cardinals.

SISTER JOAN

My beloved Brothers, I accept your votes...of confidence. I am—like all of you—unworthy of the office, but I will do my darndest to guide our church that it might be a beacon of justice, love, and equality.

As a first sign to the world of this mission, I invite you to join me in removing our gold rings of office which are viewed by the world as signs of princely status. We are not meant to be princes, but servants of the poor, defenders of the oppressed. The rings will be sold to provide food for the hungry.

And then...instead of offering a ring to be kissed by those we meet, perhaps we might offer as equals a hand for shaking or arms for embracing.

For my part, I will continue to live simply, as my vow of poverty enjoins, and I invite you to live simply as well, in imitation of Jesus whose example we have pledged to follow and of our brother Francis, who so recently showed us the way. I urge you to abandon the wealth and worldliness that give scandal to those who look to us to lead the way to a life of the spirit.

I hope that you will work with me to create a more viable Church for the 21st century: one that goes beyond a literal interpretation of scripture and abandons dogmas rendered not credible by science and common sense in a post-modern world.

I invite you to join me in attending to the voices of our people, to listen, listen, listen to what they need to make their lives healthier, their families safer, their spirits more alive, and to provide them a place in the Church that acknowledges their value and honors their gifts.

Finally, I urge you to embrace a mission to care not just for the members of our Catholic faith, not even for just all people on earth, but for the earth itself, which is being polluted and plundered and overpopulated to the point of extinction. We must find a way to save our precious planet, to redeem its beauty and sacredness.

Most importantly, I beg you, in espousing these goals, to be open to whatever changes in the Church we must make to bring them about. Because I promise you: there will be changes. So I urge you: remember your oath of loyalty; remember the pope's infallibility; and hold onto your hats!

(Lights out.)

End of Act I

Act II

Scene 1:

A month later. Office of SISTER JOAN. She is meditating, sitting in lotus position, chanting “OOOOMMMMM.” This sound escalates electronically and segues into the sound of trumpets—like those calling audiences to performances at the Globe Theatre. JOAN SHAKESPEARE appears, wearing a long cloak and a wig that make her look like her brother William.

JOAN SHAKESPEARE

How dost thou, Sweet Sister? How fares my Joan?
Uneasy sits thy rump on Peter’s throne?

SISTER JOAN

You look a lot like—

JOAN SHAKESPEARE

I am his sister Joan—
the one who thought up every Shakespeare plot,
yet got no compense from the little snot.

SISTER JOAN

Well, that seems so unfair.
He could have learned to share.

JOAN SHAKESPEARE

Your six iambs do not a blank verse make.
To talk like this is not a piece o’ cake.
Do not presume, my little chickadee,
to mime your betters in a repartee.

SISTER JOAN

No need to get huffy about it! Why are you here?

JOAN SHAKESPEARE

Of vaulting ambition I’ve come to warn;
it often turns us into what we scorn.

SISTER JOAN

You don’t have to worry about me on that score. I have too much of the milk of human kindness.

JOAN SHAKESPEARE

...yet give yourself away with just that boast.
Who brags of virtue flirts with vice the most.

SISTER JOAN

Is it vice to undo centuries of pomp and prideful power?

JOAN SHAKESPEARE

What's done is done. To think you can undo
the done may be your own undoing. Who
undoes what she would will was never done
may find her own undoing all unspun.

SISTER JOAN

(Beat.)

Can you say that again?

JOAN SHAKESPEARE

(Pointing at SISTER JOAN.)

The pope infallible be Number One.
Yet after her may not come gentle nun.

SISTER JOAN

Oh....! I get it. So what should I do.

JOAN SHAKESPEARE

Abandon legacy of fascist rule
that oils the wheels of global ridicule.
Provide the Church some credibility:
Achieve your mission with...democracy!

SISTER JOAN

I hear what you're saying. But I might need to achieve my mission while I have the luxury
of being an infallible fascist. Then maybe we can afford democracy.

JOAN SHAKESPEARE

On this emprise do not procrastinate.
The Church from feudal shackles liberate!

SISTER JOAN

Okay, Okay!

*(JOAN SHAKESPEARE throws off cape and wig—
to reveal POPE JOAN I.)*

POPE JOAN I

Had you going there, didn't I, Babe? Look at us—we're twins! Well, we could be, if you

POPE JOAN I (*Cont.*)

would dress up a little more and ditch the Birkenstocks. Joanie, Sweetheart, this is Italy—the home of Ferragamo, Amalfi, Gucci, Prada. Just walk down the street and get yourself a pair of shoes that don't make you look like a dyke-in-a-dress. Something in a nice, rich, off-white suede, with a little heel. Would do wonders for your posture.

SISTER JOAN

I'm glad you're here. I need your advice. And Saint Joan's too.

(*SAINT JOAN appears.*)

SAINT JOAN

You called?

POPE JOAN I

Advice on what?

SISTER JOAN

We're moving forward with our mission to save the world through education and contraception. Aunt Kitty's working on the education part, but I'm hoping you can suggest a way to persuade people to use family planning.

SAINT JOAN

Talk to the media.

POPE JOAN I

Yeah. Nothing works better than a headline like: "Pope Pushes Pill."

SAINT JOAN

Give a lot of interviews. Bill Moyers, Lesley Stahl, Barbara Walters—

POPE JOAN I

Oprah, Ellen, Rosie...

SISTER JOAN

Then what?

POPE JOAN I

Then you want to visit lots of places where the government doesn't pay for G.Y.N. checkups, places with no spas or Victoria's Secrets—

SISTER JOAN

Developing countries.

POPE JOAN I

Make nice with the head honchos, shake hands for the cameras. Then hot-peddle the pope

POPE JOAN I (*Cont.*)

mobile out to the sticks, get out and move amongst the regular folk, smiling and waving and giving everyone little souvenirs you've personally blessed. They love that stuff.

SISTER JOAN

What souvenirs?

POPE JOAN I

Diaphragms and condoms. You'll be a one-woman Trojan horse.

SISTER JOAN

But just because we give them out doesn't mean they'll get used.

POPE JOAN I

Are you kidding? "Blessed by the pope"?

SAINT JOAN

But they have to be taught how to use them.

POPE JOAN I

So...take some bananas.

SAINT JOAN

You need pamphlets—for those who can read. You need clinics. And people on the ground to explain and to help.

SISTER JOAN

A hundred million people live in developing countries? That's a lot of clinics, and a lot of traveling. And a lot of "souvenirs."

POPE JOAN I

And a lot of blessing.

(Rubbing her right shoulder.)

Be grateful for Ben-Gay. In my day, we used cow dung.

SISTER JOAN

We'll have to raise the money. Any ideas on how to proceed with the sale of Vatican real estate.

SAINT JOAN

Start with the vacation spot: Castel Gandolfo.

POPE JOAN I

Who needs a summer getaway that's includes two palaces, three villas, an observatory, a garden the size of five football fields, and thirteen chicken coops? I mean how many eggs can one person eat?

SISTER JOAN

Where do we find a buyer?

SAINT JOAN

It is perfect for summer camp. Try the Girl Scouts.

POPE JOAN I

Next, unload St. Peter's.

SISTER JOAN

There'll be resistance. It's a sentimental favorite.

SAINT JOAN

Please! There are five-hundred-ninety-nine other Catholic Churches in Rome.

SISTER JOAN

Won't it be too expensive for anyone to buy?

POPE JOAN I

Are you serious? With destination weddings, they'll make back the money in spades.

SAINT JOAN

Then we have the Papal Palace.

POPE JOAN I

Make a list of potential buyers and invite them to a high-end open house.

SISTER JOAN

Hmm...they would have to be the richest people in the world.

POPE JOAN I

Check 'em out on Forbes.

SISTER JOAN

I'd want to keep a little chapel...and a corner of the garden.

SAINT JOAN

And your studio apartment. Maybe a few tiny offices.

POPE JOAN I

But really, who needs all this architectural bling? Hire a designer to "stage" the place...make it look a little...homier.

SISTER JOAN

What about the art?

POPE JOAN I

Just call in Christie's and auction it off.

SISTER JOAN

But some of the art's...well, attached to the ceiling.

POPE JOAN I

Then it's...

POPE JOAN I & SAINT JOAN (*Together.*)

on the house!

SISTER JOAN

I better get started.

POPE JOAN I

Joanie, Joanie—you don't do this. You give it to your people to do. You're the pope. You got more important fish to fry.

SISTER JOAN

That's true. Right now I'm fishing for women to name as cardinals.

POPE JOAN I

Oooo, I love it! Gimme the dope.

SAINT JOAN

Who's on the short list?

SISTER JOAN

The list needs to be long, not short. I figure if fifty-one percent of the world is women, fifty-one percent of the Cardinals should be women. That's what I was praying about when
(*To POPE JOAN I.*)
you...arrived.

POPE JOAN I

So...who's first?

SISTER JOAN

Sister Jeannine Gramick.

POPE JOAN I

Never heard of her.

SISTER JOAN

She champions the rights of gays and lesbians; started back in the seventies and been getting flack from the Vatican ever since.

SAINT JOAN

Maybe you don't want to start with her.

SISTER JOAN

Okay, okay, how about Nicole Kidman? She's Catholic.

SAINT JOAN

Hmm...movie star or renegade nun? This is your best idea for an opener?

SISTER JOAN

I think the Church would be more in tune with the people if it were run by regular Catholics instead of all professional clerics. So the other women so far are

(Consults her iPhone.)

an Australian dancer, an African archeologist, a Japanese nurse, an Iranian hairdresser, a Peruvian farmer, a British neuroscientist, and an Italian chef.

POPE JOAN I

I'd open with the Italian chef and work your way up to the renegade nun.

SISTER JOAN

Thanks for the pointers.

(Puts away her phone.)

Should I be...um...scared?

SAINT JOAN

Of what?

SISTER JOAN

Well...no one knows better than you two...that people unpopular with certain cardinals have been known to...disappear.

POPE JOAN I

Don't worry, Joanie—

POPE JOAN I & SAINT JOAN

(Together, thumbs up.)

We've got your back.

SISTER JOAN

That's a relief. Now I gotta get to work on an official plan for "liberating the Church from feudal shackles." Where is that papal seal stamp?

(She rifles through her desk drawers.)

POPE JOAN I

Bottom drawer.

SISTER JOAN

*(Taken aback, holding up a 2-foot-long gold wax sealer,
shaped something like a traditional pepper grinder.)*

Whoooooa!

POPE JOAN I

The Borgia pope had that specially commissioned.

*(Taking it, demonstrating stamping wax with a vengeance
onto the desk top.)*

He liked to make an “impression.”

SAINT JOAN

(Snatching it away, using it as a drum major’s baton.)

But you could lead your own parades.

POPE JOAN I

(Snatching it back, using it as a bat. . .)

Or you could join Italy’s softball team.

(Hands it over to SAINT JOAN.)

SAINT JOAN

(Demonstrating.)

You could use it for peppering your pasta.

(Hands it back.)

POPE JOAN I

(Using it as a cane in a Fred Astaire dance routine.)

Or...for “Puttin’ on the Ritz.”

SISTER JOAN

(Laughing.)

Give me that!

POPE JOAN I & SAINT JOAN

*(But THEY hold the stamp together as a lightsaber,
pointing it dramatically at SISTER JOAN.)*

May the Life Force be with you!

(A measure of Star-Wars-like music as lights go down.)

Scene 2:

*A few days later. A corner of the Vatican garden.
HENRY, oblivious of the gorgeous view, paces
nervously in front of a bench, SISTER JOAN enters with
a picnic basket.*

SISTER JOAN

So sorry I'm late— I was packing us a picnic lunch.

HENRY

You have staff for that.

SISTER JOAN

The “servant of the servants of God” shouldn't have servants.

(Holds up the basket.)

Three-bean salad with goat cheese and chocolate-chocolate-chip fudge cookies.

*(She sets the basket down. She looks around. So,
now, does HENRY. She takes a deep breath.)*

Isn't it lovely here? I like this little corner of the garden best—the geraniums remind me of home. In summer, Mom always has big pots of them on the porch.

(He looks at her sharply.)

In Iowa.

(He relaxes. She gestures to the bench.)

Let's just sit for a moment, mindfully.

HENRY

Mindfully?

SISTER JOAN

(Gesturing “Don't worry.”)

I won't try to convert you to Buddhism. If it makes you more comfortable, call it “practicing the presence of God.”

*(They sit for ten seconds. She is drinking in the beauty
for sustenance. He is miserably uncomfortable.)*

SISTER JOAN *(Cont.)*

Thank you for coming.

HENRY

A summons by the pope is not to be ignored—even if it's to be handed a pink slip.

SISTER JOAN

Why ever would I do that? I need you. I need a policy adviser.

HENRY

What you need...is an exorcist.

SISTER JOAN

I know you think we're moving a little fast.

HENRY

Really?

SISTER JOAN

But that's exactly why I want you—a member of the Loyal Opposition—to be my adviser. You are loyal, aren't you?

HENRY

I am loyal to the Church—what's left of it.

SISTER JOAN

The change has got to go beyond the superficial. All well and good to dry clean the Curia and purge the property. But if the Church is the People of God, then it needs to be a church of the people.

HENRY

It is a church of the people.

SISTER JOAN

Not when the people have no say in running it.

HENRY

Look at the gospels. Jesus says he will build his church on Peter and the Twelve Apostles—not on the “people.”

SISTER JOAN

But Peter and the others *were* the people. They had wives and children and neighbors and jobs. They dressed like everybody else. They were “regular folk—who relied on input from their communities.

HENRY

Don't you think our bishops and cardinals come from “regular folk”?

SISTER JOAN

“Come from,” maybe. But I'm not sure they are anymore...or even remember what it was like.

HENRY

There is still plenty of “input from their communities,” as you call it.

SISTER JOAN

Input, yes. But input is not voice. Voice is something that gets a vote. Input can be ignored. Votes cannot.

HENRY

I see. So this...“policy” on which you claim to want my advice is democratizing church governance.

SISTER JOAN

Yes.

HENRY

What’s so great about democracy? In the long run, it seems to devolve into capitalistic oligarchy. Look at what’s happened in the Western World—rich people and corporations determine any election.

SISTER JOAN

That’s a travesty of democracy. It doesn’t mean it can’t in principle work. Consider the alternative. Not all sovereigns are benevolent—even in the Church.

HENRY

But it’s mad to think that—

SISTER JOAN

Just hear me out.

HENRY

Do I have a choice?

SISTER JOAN

(Stands, pulls herself together, anticipating his resistance.)

It’s a simple four-point plan. One: Every Catholic adult is eligible for the priesthood. No matter their gender or marital status—if they are willing to put in years of seminary training for a job with low pay and long hours, bring ‘em on! Two: Bishops are not appointed, but elected from the clergy by the people of the diocese. All registered Catholics over eighteen get to vote. Elections are held every seven years. Two-term limit. Three: The College of one hundred Cardinals will be half lay people, half clerics, half male, half female. They are not appointed by the pope, but elected by the bishops—for one seven-year term. No re-election. Spread the love. Four: The pope is elected by the cardinals—for one seven-year term. So what do you think?

HENRY

I think you are a papal Caligula.

SISTER JOAN

You want Caligula? How about John XII, who gambled away the papal treasury? Or maybe

SISTER JOAN (*Cont.*)

Benedict IX who sold the papacy to his successor. No—wait! My favorite: Alexander VI, who, despite his eight children with several mistresses, bribed his way into the office, raised money for wars by selling indulgences and red hats, and murderously converted the papal states into a Borgia family fief.

HENRY

All right, all right!

(*Second thought.*)

Did you just happen to have those damning specifics on the tip of your memory?

SISTER JOAN

Wiki research. Knew it would come in handy.

HENRY

In Borgia's day, popes were secular princes. The Vatican was a political player. Don't you think corruption was probably inevitable? Popes are human; doesn't mean the office is—

SISTER JOAN

So how would you advise me?

HENRY

What?

SISTER JOAN

To get the cardinals to go along with it.

HENRY

Well since we do not yet have a democracy and you are the pope, having the cardinals "go along" is not an issue, is it? And—

SISTER JOAN

But...I don't want to be a fascist. It's not...healthy.

HENRY

(*Ignoring the interruption.*)

—and since you have just appointed fifty-one percent of the cardinals, it shouldn't be a problem.

SISTER JOAN

But the other forty-nine percent...I want them to...

HENRY

Like you? And your ridiculous plan? Grow up, Joan. Democracy—even with its flaws—may be a legitimate form of governance for secular institutions. But that doesn't mean the Church should imitate them.

SISTER JOAN

But that's just what it has done for centuries—imitated the absolute monarchy of the Roman Empire.

HENRY

The Church is divine.

SISTER JOAN

The leaders who run it are not. They need to be held accountable—to the people who vote for them.

HENRY

What you propose would be a contradiction of the clear intention of Jesus.

SISTER JOAN

You make it sound like Jesus gave Peter the keys to the Vatican and Peter turned around and gave each apostle a diocese. But you know very well that the earliest Christians elected their leaders; it wasn't until the Middle Ages that the laity lost its vote...to the monarchs who imposed their own candidates.

HENRY

“Democratic process” sounds all very idealistic. But can you imagine the power struggles, the backroom electioneering—

SISTER JOAN

That happens now. I did it myself. Let's get the campaigning out of the closet. Eliminate candidates who are not qualified.

HENRY

And your cardinals—this inexperienced hoi-polloi of female farmers and hairdressers who will advise the pope and help him—

SISTER JOAN

Her.

HENRY

—make policy and rule on doctrine. How are they qualified?

SISTER JOAN

All lay people elected cardinals would have to receive training—in Scripture, Canon Law, Church history. We don't want them repeating past mistakes. And anyway, in this new College of Cardinals, there will be theologians. Maybe finally they will be listened to instead of silenced. And there will be scientists, who could help us see the folly of doctrines and rules created in and for a pre-modern world.

HENRY

You know what this will bring—a liberalizing of the church’s teaching that will leave the faithful confused and angry.

SISTER JOAN

How do you think the faithful liberals have felt for the last fifty years?

HENRY

So to even up the score, you are willing to take the church into schism? Don’t do it, Joan. I beg you.

SISTER JOAN

You think if I kill the fatted calf for the alienated prodigals, the elder brothers will rebel.

HENRY

I think they will not want to stay in a home they no longer recognize.

SISTER JOAN

Then we must help them see how healthy and happy that home can be. Can I count on you for that?

HENRY

You can count on me...to be the Loyal Opposition.

SISTER JOAN

Opposition to what?

HENRY

To you—and the threat of another Reformation that your heresies provoke—one to make Luther seem a lightweight.

SISTER JOAN

(Seeing no honorable way out.)

Ah, but it’s you who pose that threat—by contradicting the teachings of an infallible pope.

HENRY

You—infallible? What a joke.

SISTER JOAN

I agree. It is a foolish, dangerous doctrine—introduced by a conservative pope who believed popes would always be conservative. But now you have to live with that foolishness or be excommunicated. Don’t you see, Henry? Now you are the heretic!

(Opens basket.)

Shall we have lunch?

(Lights out. Music: Joni Mitchell singing: “Both Sides” Now segues into...)

Scene 3:

The action transpires during the following month—captured on video footage of Pope Joan II visiting developing countries, driving the pope-mobile—with mammoth bunches of bananas strapped to its roof—into remote places, walking among the common people, carrying a huge basket of condoms, throwing packets into the waving, appreciative crowd.

VOICE OVER of REPORTER. (Recorded.)

Pope Joan II has got her papacy off to a roaring start with a month-long missionary campaign through the developing world, where she is visiting her Family Planning Clinics and being warmly welcomed by enthusiastic crowds eager to see her Holiness and receive special souvenirs which she has personally blessed.

(Shouts from onscreen of “Viva la Mama!” and “Joan-EE! Joan-EE! Joan-EE!”)

Scene 4:

The end of the month. SISTER JOAN's office. The floor is piled with huge canvas mail bags. SISTER KATHERINE is sticking pins in a big wall map. SISTER JOAN enters with backpack, her papal cassock hiked up and stuffed in her belt. The white socks are now knee-highs.

SISTER JOAN

I'm back!

SISTER KATHERINE

(Embracing her.)

Joanie! How was your trip?

SISTER JOAN

Quite the Odyssey. Let's just hope my Trojans are more successful than Homer's.

(Puts down backpack. Distressed.)

Henry and his right-wing pals are picketing in the Square. I had to climb over the garden wall. Listen!

(She throws open a window. We hear angry male voices chanting.)

ANGRY MALE VOICES (O.S.)

Just say "Nope"
to the woman pope!
Her liberal schemes
are too extreme!
Dethrone Joan
if she won't atone!

SISTER JOAN

(Closing window, but affected by the chanting.)

Catchy, huh?

SISTER KATHERINE

Should we be worried about your safety?

SISTER JOAN

Nah. I've got Life-Force insurance.

(Gesturing to mailbags.)

What's all this?

SISTER KATHERINE

Your fan mail. Well, no, that's mostly electronic. These are the awards, medals, honorary degrees, and certificates of appreciation suitable for framing. Everybody loves you, Joanie, and can't stop saying so.

SISTER JOAN

Oh! But this isn't...that's not what I—

(Gently kicking a mailbag, distressed.)

Maybe Henry is right. Maybe I am just driven by *hubris*.

SISTER KATHERINE

You've had a long, exhausting trip, Honey. You need some rest.

SISTER JOAN

But what if it's true, Aunt Kitty? What if my passion to save the world—to change the Church—is all just...vanity?

SISTER KATHERINE

Vanity? You want vanity? Look around. You think Jesus would have recognized anything or anyone in the Vatican? You are our only hope.

SISTER JOAN

How can you be so sure? Is it because of my voices?

SISTER KATHERINE

No. It's because of you. I know you, Joanie. I've known you all your life.

SISTER JOAN

Then you know that I've always been—that I am—willful and stubborn and reckless and—

SISTER KATHERINE

—and insistent on getting your way? You bet. Also idealistic and tireless and generous.

Definitely not a gal whose head is turned by a white dress. You have vision, Joanie. Never doubt it or fear it.

(She embraces SISTER JOAN.)

SISTER JOAN

(Pointing to the map.)

How's this project going?

SISTER KATHERINE

So far, I've got half a dozen stops lined up for your Education Junket.

SISTER JOAN

They're willing to found schools for girls?

SISTER KATHERINE

Let's say they're willing to talk about it—as long as we pay for them.

SISTER JOAN

Where are these stops?

SISTER KATHERINE

Cambodia, Myanmar, Bangladesh, then you swing over to Somalia, then down to Angola, and up the coast to Nigeria. The mayor of Detroit has put in a special request, but he's not on our route.

SISTER JOAN

That's a lot of schools. I don't know, Aunt Kitty. I'm not sure even Michelangelo can foot this bill.

SISTER KATHERINE

It is daunting, isn't it?

SISTER JOAN

We've just got to find a way to cut back on expenses.

SISTER KATHERINE

Well, what made the American parochial school system possible was the cheap labor of the nuns. Most of whom have died or long since left the convent and started families.

SISTER JOAN

Any chance of getting them back?

SISTER KATHERINE

Get real.

SISTER JOAN

Maybe we could recruit the daughters of ex-nuns.

SISTER KATHERINE

Haven't had much luck with vocations the last several decades.

SISTER JOAN

Well, they wouldn't have to become full-fledged, permanent nuns. It could be like the Peace Corps or the Mormons. Sign up for a couple years of missionary work.

SISTER KATHERINE

Would they take vows?

SISTER JOAN

They'll live in poverty whether they take the vow or not. But if they want to, I guess they could. Temporary vows.

SISTER KATHERINE

Short-term sisters. Worth a shot. If this model works, we could try it back home too.

SISTER JOAN

(Wistful.)

Home. Seems so far away.

SISTER KATHERINE

Hard to believe this has all happened in less than a year.

SISTER JOAN

Hard to believe it's happened at all.

SISTER KATHERINE

It has been an amazing journey.

SISTER JOAN

I'm just not sure where it's going to end. Henry's out there carrying his sign because he thinks we're headed for schism.

SISTER KATHERINE

(Opens her Notebook.)

Our neuroscientist Cardinal Gwendolen agrees.

SISTER JOAN

She finished her assignment?

SISTER KATHERINE

Reviewed all the scientific literature while you were gone.

SISTER JOAN

So what is the difference? In layperson's terms.

SISTER KATHERINE

(Consulting notes. Or maybe sharing a PowerPoint?)

Researchers studied the brains of liberals and conservatives as they responded to pleasant and gruesome images. They discovered conservatives have much stronger responses to negative, threatening images. And liberals to positive ones.

SISTER JOAN

Sounds like the world is scary place for conservatives.

SISTER KATHERINE

Liberals have more gray matter in the Anterior Cingulate Cortex—the part of the brain that understands complexity... which explains why they're good at tolerating uncertainty and conflicts.

SISTER JOAN

And the conservatives?

SISTER KATHERINE

Have more gray matter in the right Amygdala, the part of the brain that processes fear, which accounts for why they're more aggressive in threatening situations.

SISTER JOAN

So...what you're saying is...they can't help it? Brain determinism? What about free will?

SISTER KATHERINE

Luckily, the brain is plastic. It can be influenced by experience. For example, a child born with lots of gray matter in her right Amygdala, might have her aggression tamed if she's ...raised in a Quaker family.

SISTER JOAN

Can the change happen in adults?

SISTER KATHERINE

Yes. Like...a liberal who has a traumatizing experience could become more fearful of something related to that experience.

SISTER JOAN

What does it all mean for the church?

SISTER KATHARINE

Cardinal Gwendolen thinks we are wired for schism.

SISTER JOAN

But there must be something we can do to help the conservatives be less...anxious? Dream therapy? Exercise? Sugar diets? Logic classes?

SISTER KATHARINE

(Consulting notes.)

Apparently reasoning doesn't work very effectively with their brains. They tend to find it...annoying.

SISTER JOAN

What then?

SISTER KATHARINE

Research on corrective measures is yet to be done.

(Checks her watch.)

I'm off now to a meeting with a brain surgeon from Oxford. *Arrivederci.*

(SISTER KATHARINE throws a kiss, exits. SISTER JOAN positions herself facing out, shakes off tension, then starts doing T'ai Chi with deep concentration.)

After a few moments, POPE JOAN I appears and joins her. They move in sync silently for several moments, then continue this as they converse.)

SISTER JOAN

I wish we could just reduce the conservatives' anxiety...convince them the world is not such a scary place.

POPE JOAN I

I can help you with that.

SISTER JOAN

Really? How?

POPE JOAN I

Drugs.

SISTER JOAN

What?

POPE JOAN I

A little Mary Jane...and the world is...not such a scary place.

SISTER JOAN

Ummm...I don't think so.

POPE JOAN I

Something more respectable then. Oxycontin? Prozac?

SISTER JOAN

Any side effects?

POPE JOAN I

A reduced sex drive.

(Thought.)

Could kill two birds with that one.

SISTER JOAN

But we'd never be able to get them to self-medicate.

POPE JOAN I

So...put it in the Communion wine.

SISTER JOAN

I like to think we're past your era's way of solving problems by slipping a Mickey into the Merlot.

POPE JOAN I

You don't believe the end justifies the means? What kind of a pope are you?

SISTER JOAN

We heard the science. They have scared brains. They just can't help it. It's like OCD's can't stop washing their hands.

POPE JOAN I

Exactly. And what works for them? I'm telling you: meds in the wine is the way to go.

SISTER JOAN

Look, even if we were immoral enough to try that, how could it not backfire? I mean the liberals take Communion too.

POPE JOAN I

So?

SISTER JOAN

So they'd end up...Unitarians!

POPE JOAN I

Point. Still...I'll leave you a starter supply of Zoloft in case you change your mind.

*(Removes a large amber plastic bottle from her pocket
and puts it on a tray next to a bottle of wine and glasses.)*

So what do you think we should do?

SISTER JOAN

We've got to ease their anxiety, love them into courage. And we have to start by finding out what they're—deep down—really afraid of.

POPE JOAN I

You want to know what conservatives are afraid of?

SISTER JOAN

Yes.

POPE JOAN I

Ask. Your. Mother. ...to Ask. Your. Father.

(Lights down.)

Scene 5:

The next day. The Vatican Garden. SISTER KATHERINE is pruning, watering, weeding the geraniums. HENRY enters.

HENRY

Don't we have gardeners for that?

SISTER KATHERINE

Not anymore. They work for the new owners now—Joanie made it a condition of the sale. But this little corner is still ours. These look just like Bessie's geraniums.

HENRY

So I've heard.

(Sits on the bench.)

"Her Holiness" said you wanted to see me.

SISTER KATHERINE

She doesn't like anyone using that title.

HENRY

She doesn't like a lot of things. If she keeps up this full, frontal assault on tradition—not to mention Church teaching—we are headed for schism. Can't you talk some sense into her?

SISTER KATHERINE

She takes after you. And anyway, she's trying to clean up the mess of millenniums.

HENRY

(“Correcting” her with the Latin plural.)

Millennia.

(Gets an “oh, please” look from her.)

Sorry.

(She sits next to him on the bench. They look at the garden.)

SISTER KATHERINE

Henry...why are you so afraid of change?

HENRY

Not all change is for the better.

(Flexes his fingers.)

Consider the aging, arthritic body.

SISTER KATHERINE

Shall I rub them for you?

HENRY

(Shaking his head.)

It doesn't help.

SISTER KATHERINE

I'm sorry.

HENRY

Kitty...

SISTER KATHERINE

Hmmm?

HENRY

Do you ever long for...the way we were as kids?

SISTER KATHERINE

What do you mean?

HENRY

You and I lived in different cities, but I know we had the same experience.

SISTER KATHERINE

You mean growing up Catholic in the fifties?

HENRY

The church was thriving. There were nuns in all the classrooms...

SISTER KATHERINE

A Catechism lesson to start every day.

HENRY

We had priests who cared about us.

SISTER KATHERINE

Some, it turned out, a little too much.

HENRY

Went to confession on Saturday and mass on Sunday.

SISTER KATHERINE

Latin, of course.

HENRY

Gave up candy for Lent.

SISTER KATHERINE

Wore dorky uniforms.

HENRY

We were altar boys—

SISTER KATHERINE

—but not altar girls.

HENRY

We gave money to the missions to adopt “pagan babies.”

SISTER KATHERINE

Who likely had quite serviceable religions of their own.

HENRY

Competed for scholarships to get into Catholic high schools.

SISTER KATHERINE

Leaving the less successful to a heathen education.

HENRY

And CYO dances—remember them? We were so innocent. Even at sixteen, seventeen, there was no confusion, no worrying about sex.

SISTER KATHERINE

It was forbidden. Everyone knew that so no one expected it. We just...enjoyed one another.

HENRY

There was a sacred rhythm to it all: the Advent wreath candles, the Christmas pageant, the Stations of the Cross in Lent, the profusion of lilies on Easter, the May Procession with hundreds of us winding through the parish streets...proudly, for all the world to see our faith. Our lives were safe and sure and...sacramental.

SISTER KATHERINE

And insular. And deluded.

HENRY

What?

SISTER KATHERINE

While we were nestled in this parochial Camelot, as you remember it, there were dioceses that still had racially segregated schools, the Catholic press was eulogizing McCarthy’s witch hunts, and women in the confessionals were being advised to stay with abusive husbands.

HENRY

I know we can't go back. We shouldn't. But some of it was worth holding on to. The strong moral training, the honoring of traditions, the loyalty we felt—to one another, to our parish, to our Church—that was something beautiful.

(Beat.)

SISTER KATHERINE

Yes. Yes, it was.

(Beat.)

HENRY

What happened?

SISTER KATHERINE

We grew up. We did what our teachers taught us to do: read, study, use our heads. We went to college, we started thinking for ourselves, questioning authority when it didn't make sense...or was insensitive.

HENRY

But not everybody has...most people live simple lives—need simple answers to feel secure, a church that reassures them, gives them hope.

SISTER KATHERINE

(Nods.)

It's why the church is flourishing in illiterate countries. But what happens when we teach them to read, to think critically, to question the authority of political leaders who are exploiting them. Do you think their questioning will stop there?

HENRY

Some things are beyond explaining, must be taken on faith.

SISTER KATHERINE

Are you content to have a church for the uncritical? Haven't we learned from the Galileo episode? Don't we want a tent big enough for Mother Teresa and Hans Kung? A church that doesn't silence its creative thinkers?

HENRY

But the new ideas must be sifted through the sieve of tradition by those who have the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

SISTER KATHERINE

Don't all of us who are open to it have the guidance of the Holy Spirit?

HENRY

Do you want another Reformation?

SISTER KATHERINE

We already have massive defections—worsened by the abuse scandal. Your credibility has shriveled. People no longer accept “Because the priest—or even the pope—says so.”

HENRY

Shamefully true. And we are paying for those sins. But we have to believe that with honesty and the grace of God, we can regain the people’s trust.

SISTER KATHERINE

Most of those left in the pews are “Cafeteria Catholics” who pick and choose which teachings to accept, which doctrines to believe. Anyway, shouldn’t we be more concerned with taking care of one another, especially the poor and the oppressed?

HENRY

It’s not enough! The church is more than the Red Cross. Yes, feed the hungry. But feed their souls too. People need the salvation story. When you’ve hit bottom with drink or drugs or loss or your own self-loathing and can’t believe that anyone could ever love you, then you need a God who does, you need a God who’s suffered as you are suffering, a God who’s promised to redeem you from your suffering—even when you’re the cause of it. Prayer has got to be more than “centering.” Oh yes, “mindfulness” is wonderful, but some people need more than their own minds. They need a God...who cares. Do you believe, Kitty, do you believe in a God who cares?

SISTER KATHERINE

I see God in everyone who cares. Perhaps the one who has hit bottom does too.

HENRY

That’s nothing more than dressed-up humanism. Can’t you see where that will take us? First we cave to popular culture on the moral issues. Then one by one the doctrines go. And finally: God. Where will it end?

SISTER KATHERINE

Maybe in a new understanding of divinity.

HENRY

What?

SISTER KATHERINE

The Jesus story isn’t the only death-and-resurrection myth that promises new life. And the golden-rule is found in all religions. Maybe it’s time to acknowledge that...even celebrate it if we dare. You and I grew up in a tradition that served us well...and taught us to serve in turn. But there are also other sources of wisdom. Even the story of the cosmos, the Holy in all of nature—not just as a creation of the God of Genesis, but in its own right.

HENRY

(Dismissively.)

Pantheism.

SISTER KATHERINE

“The force that through the green fuse drives the flower...”

HENRY

(Wistfully.)

...“drives my green age...”

SISTER KATHERINE

At least you still remember Dylan Thomas.

HENRY

I remember you reading it to me.

SISTER KATHERINE

I will tell you a story. Yesterday I brought my lunch to this garden. I poured my tea and added honey. As I raised the cup to my lips, a bee flew towards me and perched on the rim where a drop had spilled. I dared not move. We two kindred honey-lovers stared at each other. Did she take my measure with her oversized eyes while I admired her bold, black stripes? A perfectly efficient and beautiful creature. How could I not share with her what had come from her bounty in the first place. Our truce was swift and silent: I would not swat her; she would not sting me. We were one—sharing a universe of matter and energy—sisters of the spirit. I tell you I have not had such a “religious experience” in all my years of praying.

HENRY

It’s a lovely, romantic story. But there are few of us ready for mystic encounters with insects. No, I don’t think your Holy Cosmos can take the place of Jesus.

SISTER KATHERINE

There was a time when you found such thinking tantalizing. You championed Teilhard’s “Cosmic Christ”...and the reforms of Vatican Two. Have you forgotten?

HENRY

I know what I was...what I wanted.

SISTER KATHERINE

I don’t understand you, Henry. Why did you stop being the brave man I loved?

HENRY

Brave? Or dangerous?

SISTER KATHERINE

What made you change?

HENRY

I...had to...

SISTER KATHERINE

Had to what?

HENRY

Make sure it would never happen again. After what happened between us, I...I didn't trust liberals anymore. I didn't trust us...me. I put myself above the rules, broke my vow of celibacy, brought you pain and misery and shame, then urged you to destroy the life we had created... and deserted you.

SISTER KATHERINE

We were young, we were in love, we were human.

HENRY

That doesn't make it all right.

SISTER KATHERINE

But that does make it forgivable.

HENRY

You can say that; you have less to be forgiven for. Why did you never tell me...about Joan?

SISTER KATHERINE

You insisted we never speak of it. And after you sent me the letter...I thought you wouldn't want to know. Was I wrong?

HENRY

I was wrong. And now I'm paying for it.

SISTER KATHERINE

What do you mean?

HENRY

My own flesh and blood is sent to be my punishment.

SISTER KATHERINE

Or your redemption.

HENRY

She is ruining everything I have spent my life working for. Kitty, please! Can't you make her stop? You're her mother! You must have some—

SISTER KATHERINE

You're afraid. That's what it is, isn't it, Henry? Afraid to trust yourself...and anyone else.

HENRY

Not anyone else—just those who would destroy the Church I love. They...they are not to be trusted.

SISTER KATHERINE

Am I not to be trusted?

HENRY

We—you and I—put our own feelings first...our liberal ideas...and they led us to... something we both regret.

SISTER KATHERINE

(Pause.)

I don't regret it.

HENRY

Don't regret our sin?

SISTER KATHERINE

How could I ever regret giving our Joan to the world?

(Beat.)

How could I ever regret loving the man you were?

(They look at each other. He takes a deep breath, starts to sob—quietly at first, then full throttle, bent over, his face in his hands. She puts her hand on his back, rubs it gently. But he responds by straightening stoically, then stands.)

SISTER KATHERINE *(Cont.)*

It's not too late, Henry. You can find that man again.

(He turns away from her, exits. Lights down. Music: Joan Osborne singing the refrain from "What if God was One of Us.")

Scene 6:

The next day. HENRY is alone in SISTER JOAN's office. He frantically searches through the desk, eventually finds what he is looking for: the papal seal stamp. He holds it up for a close look, handles it lovingly. Maybe even kisses it? We hear voices of SISTER JOAN and POPE JOAN I approaching. HENRY hides the seal, then himself.

POPE JOAN I (O.S.)

How's the revolution going?

SISTER JOAN (O.S.)

I'm getting push-back.

POPE JOAN I (O.S.)

(Sarcastic.)

No kidding.

(The women enter, barefoot, their papal cassocks hiked up, revealing white yoga pants. SISTER JOAN carries a white yoga mat.)

SISTER JOAN

My iPhone keep exploding. I'm on number thirty-six. It's killing the communication budget.

POPE JOAN I

What did you expect?

(Unaware of HENRY, SISTER JOAN spreads her mat and they execute various warm up poses in sync for a few moments.)

SISTER JOAN

I don't know if I can take seven years of this.

POPE JOAN I

It'll calm down. People can get used to anything.

SISTER JOAN

Antipopes are sprouting up like barnyard grass—in France, Spain, Brazil, Australia, Colorado—

POPE JOAN I

They're all old. It won't last. Ten years tops. Look at the bright side: the humanists, the ecumenists, the feminists, they're all back. And you're the Homecoming Queen.

SISTER JOAN

Still. I wish it didn't have to be so either-or. Why can't we all just...play nice with others?

POPE JOAN I

Human nature? Freud's "pleasure principle"? Survival instinct? Whatever.

SISTER JOAN

There's gotta be a way...

POPE JOAN I

Just try to feel the Life Force flooding through you and

(Demonstrating.)

Streeeeeeeeetch...

*(HENRY comes out of hiding. He does not see or hear
POPE JOAN I.)*

HENRY

Joan! What's going on? Who are you talking to?

SISTER JOAN

Henry! What are you doing here?

(She quickly lets down her cassock.)

HENRY

I came to...uh, ask you about something.

SISTER JOAN

So why were you skulking in the shadows?

HENRY

I wasn't "skulking." And stop avoiding the question. To whom were you talking?

POPE JOAN I

(Prompting SISTER JOAN.)

You were praying.

SISTER JOAN

Eh, I was...praying. Don't you ever pray out loud?

HENRY

You were not "praying."

POPE JOAN I

(Prompting SISTER JOAN.)

Phone call.

SISTER JOAN

OK, OK. I was...talking to my secretary.

*(Pretends to pull something off her ear
and holds it up in her closed hand.)*

Bluetooth.

HENRY

Show me.

*(SISTER JOAN turns in desperation to POPE JOAN I
who shrugs.)*

HENRY *(Cont.)*

What's going on?

SISTER JOAN

(Deep breath.)

If you must know, Henry...I've been having...visions.

HENRY

Visions?

(SISTER JOAN nods.)

Of?

SISTER JOAN

Of Saint Joan. And the first Pope Joan.

HENRY

How long has this been going on?

SISTER JOAN

(Rolling up her yoga mat.)

Since just before I came to Rome...to meet you. They've both been very helpful.

HENRY

Does Sister Katherine know about this?

SISTER JOAN

Oh yes.

HENRY

So for nearly a year you've been having visions of Saint Joan and the imaginary Pope Joan—

POPE JOAN I

(To HENRY, though he can't hear her.)

Watch your language, Buddy!

HENRY

—and never thought to ask for professional help.

SISTER JOAN

I asked Aunt Kitty. She said she gets answers to her prayers too.

HENRY

In person?

(SISTER JOAN shrugs.)

I think you should resign the papacy. You are clearly mentally unstable. What Canon Law calls “*non sui compos*.”

POPE JOAN I

(Prompting SISTER JOAN.)

Psst! Joanie—over here.

(Points to a book on the shelf. SISTER JOAN quickly crosses to it.)

SISTER JOAN

Eh, which canon is that?

(Pulls Code of Canon Law off the shelf.)

HENRY

Number ninety-nine. It describes a person who lacks the use of reason.

POPE JOAN I

(Prompting SISTER JOAN.)

But check out three-thirty-five.

SISTER JOAN

(Frantically paging and stalling.)

Well, you may think that, Henry, but Canon, uh,...three-thirty-five notes that...

(Finds place.)

“If the Pope becomes *non sui compos*, no innovation is to be made in the governance of the Church.” So my resigning wouldn’t do you any good—you couldn’t change any of my policies.

HENRY

The canon adds that there are special laws which have been enacted for these circumstances.

SISTER JOAN

What are they?

HENRY

Well, eh, it doesn’t specify. But probably they are the same ones that apply to a bishop who is *non sui compos*.

SISTER JOAN

Which are?

HENRY

According to Canon four-thirteen, the auxiliary bishop takes over. So in your case—

POPE JOAN I

(Prompting SISTER JOAN.)

Four-sixteen!

SISTER JOAN

(Flips to 416.)

Ah, but according to Canon...four-sixteen, only the Pope—who is higher ranking—can actually remove the alleged *non sui compos* bishop from office.

POPE JOAN I

(Prompting SISTER JOAN.)

Three-thirty-one!

SISTER JOAN

(Flipping back, running her finger down the page.)

But in order to declare the Pope *non sui compos*, there would have to be someone at a higher level with that power. But there is no one.

(Reading.)

“The Pope alone has supreme, full, immediate and universal power in the Church.”

(Closes the book.)

But you knew all that, Henry.

HENRY

I didn’t think you did.

SISTER JOAN

Don’t underestimate me.

(SAINT JOAN appears.)

Or my...colleagues.

POPE JOAN I & SAINT JOAN *(Together.)*

Amen.

HENRY

But Joan, you talk to people who aren’t there. You are crazy.

SISTER JOAN

Don’t be silly. Where would the Church be if it diagnosed everybody who had visions as “crazy”? What about the apostles, Paul on the road to Damascus—

POPE JOAN I

Mary Magdalen at the tomb.

SAINT JOAN

Yours truly.

SISTER JOAN

Catherine of Siena, Teresa of Avila, all the mystics...

POPE JOAN I

...those crack-pot kids at Fatima and Lourdes.

HENRY

Your case is different.

SISTER JOAN

Why? Because you don't like what my visions tell me?

HENRY

Because all those others were...appraised.

SAINT JOAN

Or set ablaze.

HENRY

The early ones by the inspired biblical authors—

POPE JOAN I

Now there's a circular argument.

HENRY

—and the later ones by Church authorities. And as you have just pointed out, a pope can't be "appraised." So, yes, your case is different. You must voluntarily resign.

SAINT JOAN

(Gesturing "Never!")

Pas possible!

POPE JOAN I

(To the Universe.)

Just when she's finding her stride?

SISTER JOAN

I don't think so.

HENRY

(Deep breath.)

Then I have no choice but to inform you: the cardinals have voted no confidence.

SISTER JOAN

Which ones?

HENRY

The real ones.

SAINT JOAN

By which he means the male ones.

HENRY

They are scandalized by your making the church a democracy.

POPE JOAN I

You bet—no more cushy jobs for life.

HENRY

If you refuse to resign, we must establish the True Church...somewhere else.

SISTER JOAN

Where?

HENRY

Avignon, Nebraska.

SAINT JOAN

Mon Dieu!

POPE JOAN I

Right-wing Wonderland!

SISTER JOAN

So you are deserting me again. Just when I need you for the second most important time in my life.

HENRY

They have...they have asked me if I would accept the papacy, should I be elected. I came here for—

(Pulling it out from its hiding place.)

—the papal seal.

SISTER JOAN

You, Henry? You are the leader of this schism?

HENRY

No, Joan. You have caused the schism. I am merely—as you asked me to be—your Opposition, loyal to the True Church.

SISTER JOAN

Can't we work together to create the True Church?

HENRY

We should not be in the business of “creating”—only preserving. Give up this ridiculous... adventure.

SISTER JOAN

You ask me to abandon my mission...when we are finally on the road to a healthy church?

HENRY

On the road to hell, more like it.

SISTER JOAN

I will not give up...not without a fight.

POPE JOAN I

Or a drink...?

*(POPE JOAN I makes a drinking gesture to
SISTER JOAN and holds up the container of Zoloft.)*

SISTER JOAN

But first, Henry...

*(SISTER JOAN pours two glasses of wine. POPE
JOAN I opens the Zoloft container, takes out a pill,
holds it over one of the glasses. SISTER JOAN
considers, then shakes her head “no.” POPE JOAN I
shrugs an acknowledgement of defeat, puts the pill
back.)*

SISTER JOAN (Cont.)

...first we must have a toast. Then a fair contest.

(She hands him a glass.)

HENRY

Contest?

SISTER JOAN

Let the people decide which is the True Church.

(They clink glasses.)

SISTER JOAN & HENRY *(Together.)*

To the Pope!

(They drink, put down the glasses. Then look at each other.)

HENRY

What will you do?

SISTER JOAN

First, I will admit...that the Pope is not infallible. Then I will invite all the faithful to listen to what theologians and scientists and poets have been telling us. And encourage everyone to decide for themselves what they believe.

HENRY

(With increasing agitation over his next lines.)

The virgin birth? The Incarnation? The Resurrection? All up for grabs?

SISTER JOAN

Let each person choose how literally or figuratively to interpret these marvelous myths.

HENRY

And what of the sacraments? Baptism...

SISTER JOAN

A lovely ritual for welcoming a child. Though some might wish to forego its references to the devil and original sin.

HENRY

The Mass?

SISTER JOAN

Yes, of course! A meal with friends that celebrates the life and radical social teachings of Jesus.

HENRY

The absolving of sins?

SISTER JOAN

Is best done, some people believe, by the offended parties when forgiveness is asked directly of them.

HENRY

What's left????!! MY GOD!!

SISTER JOAN

Not quite.

HENRY

What?! You would do away with God?!

SISTER JOAN

Some may prefer to do away with your god. With that supernatural parent who relieves us of the anxiety of being mortal. With that arbitrary god who, despite being thought all-powerful and just, does not always answer prayers or impose justice. And who is imagined by both sides of every war to justify their cause. Yes. For some, that god will go.

HENRY

And be replaced by...?

SISTER JOAN

By the God who is bigger than anybody's understanding of God. The ultimate source of life and love. The God who is not three persons, not a person at all, not even a being, but Being Itself—the reality underlying everything that is.

HENRY

(Enraged.)

I will NOT. Let. You. Do this!

(He raises the seal high to strike her with it. SAINT JOAN and POPE JOAN I each ritually extend an arm towards him. He freezes, drops the seal, then clutches the hand that held it, falls onto a chair, bent over in pain.)

SISTER JOAN

Don't worry, Henry. The Nebraska climate will work miracles for that arthritis.

(Goes on one knee and pats him on the hand.)

And I promise: I will visit you.

(HENRY straightens up slowly till they are eye-to-eye and looks at her as threateningly as he can.)

(Crossfade as SISTER JOAN crosses to edge of stage.)

Scene 7:

Immediately following. Vatican Square.

SISTER JOAN

(To audience.)

My dear sisters and brothers, surely the time has come for liberals and conservatives... to make peace. We must not go on thinking of one another as the enemy. That is not the Christian—

(Pointing to various audience members for each—)

or Jewish or Muslim or Hindu or Buddhist or Wiccan or Humanist—way to behave. We have just got to learn to evolve into a higher life form before it's too late. To stretch our minds until we can understand how the other person thinks, to stretch our hearts until we can feel how the other person feels.

As you have always known, the pope is not infallible.

(Indicating herself.)

But this pope is hospitable. So I'm inviting to the Vatican—I'm sure Amazon would rent it back to us for the event—anyone of any or no religion who has a good idea about how to solve this problem. Let's not call it Vatican Council Three. Let's call it World Get-Together One. We would especially welcome those who truly understand human behavior: sociologists, psychologists, anthropologists and kindergarten teachers.

But it's not just for professionals. We want regular folk too. If there's somebody in your family or your office or your book group who gets along with everybody, we want that person's input. So take up a collection and buy them a ticket to Rome. The rest of you can follow along online...sending good vibes our way.

Meanwhile...let's try to remember: Stretching is good for us.

(She demonstrates with arms out in a "Y.")

We can feel the Life Force running through us. We can shake a little of our Life Force onto our neighbor...

(Demonstrates.)

and receive a little from our neighbor.

(Slowly, deliberately.)

We. Can. Bless. One another.

(We hear loud cheering. Confetti falls from the sky.

Trumpets blare: the climactic ending of Joan Tower's "Fanfare for the Uncommon Woman." SISTER JOAN throws kisses to the audience. Lights down.)

End of Play