



Dear Francis, Will You Be My Boyfriend?

Dear Francis,

I shouldn't be having an affair with anybody, much less a pope. But if anybody can attract the attention of a sixty-nine-year-old happily married clergywoman, it's you. I've been looking for a spiritual leader like you my whole life, and looking in all the wrong places. I knew I was looking for a better father than the one I had, but I didn't know I was looking for a Papa. It turns out I was looking for someone like you, Francis. Until I met

you, I had become slightly embarrassed to say I was a Christian, given what the punishmentalists were doing to give Christianity a bad name.*

I also serve a congregation in Greenwich Village in New York City where even the straight people like me are slightly queer. I've been ordained for decades, and I've been ministering here in New York for ten years. If you don't mind my saying, despite the unlikeliness of it all, I have fallen in love with you. I think you are the real thing. I don't think you're perfect, but I think you are damn good. You're probably as good as it gets.

I was born a Lutheran; a Missouri Synod Lutheran—that's the conservative kind. We Lutherans are known for our disdain of all things Catholic. We love to tell the story ad nauseam of our hero, Martin Luther, putting the Ninety-Five Theses up on your church's door. We love to tell how *your people* sold indulgences and *we* live by grace. We love to tell how *your people*

*By *punishmentalists*, I mean the people who imagine God is a judge rather than a gracious creator. I mean the people who are so pure that they only want to figure out who to blame. I mean the good/bad binary people, the ones on both right and left who find enemies and beat the crap out of them. I mean the ones so determined not to go to hell that they make hell, instead of heaven, on earth. God is grace and love and peace, not blame and shame. The blamers and shamers have punished themselves and God and given Christians a bad name.

let the pope tell them what to do and that's why *we* wouldn't think of voting for John Kennedy, a president who might follow a pope more than the Constitution. Today, Republican candidates for president who say that the Bible and their literalistic God is first place in their heart amuse me. That's the kind of slightly open-minded progressive I have become. I have a feeling we have in common the experience of religion-based opposition—for you, coming from the hidebound Vatican elite, and for me, from the hidebound evangelicals to my right.

Married to a Jew, with a daughter-in-law who's a rabbi—and three grandchildren who are learning Hebrew, one of whom who goes to Jewish parochial school—I have been pried open by difference and have learned to respect both Constitution and Christ. Uncanny, isn't it, that your theology resonates so powerfully with mine?

I know we're both trained as community organizers—me by Saul Alinsky and you by the streets of Argentina, brimming with liberation theology and more trouble than I ever saw. I know we are both sneakily political and really don't see the difference between politics and religion. I also know that we are bothered by the same things—the face of the poor and the desacralization

of the earth—and that we have common enemies in instrumentalism (the way people use each other) and capitalism (that potentially good system that has gotten too big for its britches). I have very little of what Ross Douthat calls your “ostentatious humility.” I am a woman. We can’t afford to be meek.

But all excuses and differentiations aside, I shouldn’t like you as much as I do. I used to hate your people with a vigor. I even wanted to title this book *Is the Pope Protestant?*, as a way of bringing you into my fold instead of my going toward yours. I wanted to use that old joke as a way of justifying how attracted I am to you. That way, I wouldn’t be so embarrassed by my previously strong prejudices against your kind. I admit it: I am a recovering anti-Catholic bigot.

By the way, I’m not asking for forgiveness, which you have offered to other women who, like me, have had abortions. I do intend to repent of my bigotry, if not my abortion. One is sinful; the other is not.

My Missouri Synod Lutheran parochial school was next door to a Catholic parochial school. We hid in the bushes, laughing at the nuns, swearing to each other that they were so demented that they had pins stuck in their heads to keep their habits on. I used to cringe at the thought, in the way only a magical-thinking child

can cringe at a presumed enemy who participates in her own bondage.

The only thing that tempered my family's prejudices against Catholics—the Polish ones and the Italian ones especially—was my mother's best friend, Helen. My mother never missed a chance to say that Helen had too many children. But they did talk on the phone every day, around ten thirty in the morning, and they loved each other. I often listened in on their conversations. My mother told Helen repeatedly to "use the pill," whatever that was.

You may as well know that I have picked a lot of fights with Catholics over the years—over abortion, over police brutality, over not being allowed to receive the Sacrament, over the way Catholics in the United States get to be political and no one notices that they're handing out voting cards during church. I really disagree with the Catholic Church about the meaning of religious freedom—yet that disagreement pales in comparison to what I see in you.

I wept the day Hurricane Sandy came through New York City. I went to check on our church building and realized the Catholics across the street were celebrating Mass. I could see through their window. The rest of the city was shut down, so I went to Mass. I prayed the

prayers. I approached the altar to receive the wine and wafer. The priest took me aside and asked me if I was Catholic. He knew I lived across the street. I said no, I was not Catholic, and he refused to serve me. I flipped out, as much about the devastation of Sandy as the rejection implied in refusing me the Eucharist. When he wasn't looking, I stole a wafer. I also met with him for an hour afterward, and we fought and fought and fought. We became friends eventually. He never knew I had stolen the wafer. I didn't eat it. I just stole it. I'm admitting that to you now and asking your forgiveness. (I have often received the Mass at Chartres, just an FYI.)

I also jumped a liturgical fence at the installation of the Roman Catholic bishop in western Massachusetts. I'll tell you that story, too, after we know each other better.

I'll tell you what happened with the Lutherans and me. We broke up. When it became time for me to be ordained, I assumed I would become a Lutheran pastor. My heart broke when the Lutherans said no, even though they had paid for my seminary education. A fellowship from an organization called Lutheran Brotherhood even bought my books. It's a long story, told too often during these forty-four years of ordained ministry. For now, suffice it to say that I used to love the Lutherans. As one of the first women "ready" to

be ordained a Lutheran, I was rejected once too often to hang around. For forty years last year, I have been ordained in the United Church of Christ, a much more open-minded denomination, which ordained the first woman in 1859 and the first gay man in 1960. As you will soon discover, I have a big bone to pick with you about women's and GLBTQ ordination. Maybe your pastoral ear will help you imagine why.

But Enough about Me

I first realized I was way too into you for normal feelings when I preached my first sermon about you. I had read the encyclical *Laudato Si* (meaning Praise Be) as soon as I began to hear the buzz. Everybody was talking about it and about you, and I am nothing if not a faddist. I love fads. And style. And buzz. You qualified on three levels. I figured you were an interesting fad. You had a cool car, a Fiat; you liked the spaghetti of the day and were putting on weight. You wore regular shoes.

You are not a fad, it turns out. You're going to last, even if something terrible happens to you tomorrow. (Yes, we worry about that. You are really out there. Maybe my letters to you will help protect you. And if they don't protect you from the demonic elements of

both of our religions, at least the letters will let people know how important you are. They will show how you are not a fad but a man of faith.)

I didn't have any idea then how much competition I would have now in loving you. Not that I want you just for myself. I don't. But I was amazed by the way my pretty-obnoxious congregation received my sermons about you. I sort of whispered them at first. You know, trial balloons. Since irony always works in my pulpit, I asked sly questions, like this: "Wouldn't it be amazing if the pope became our environmental leader?" The response was overwhelming: people started smiling and clapping. And this is a tough, New York crowd!

Then when you said, "Who am I to judge?" regarding GLBTQ people, I flipped. I preached several sermons on that statement, thinking it a major breakthrough in just about everything, including the punishmentalist Christianity we both despise. I admit it: my theology is seriously reactive. I have been hurt way too many times by fundamentalist rigidity. I have seen Jesus abused so often—used as a hammer against gay people or divorced people or people who don't make a weekly mass or whatever it is that the punishmentalists think "those people" have done wrong—that I find it hard not to be reactive. Finally, I had something good

to say about you and Jesus, all in the same breath. I was thrilled. And my congregation uncannily kept clapping. And clapping. And clapping some more. "Tell us more about the pope," they said in the narthex after the service.

We all knew you were coming to New York. I never thought I'd get to see you during your visit. I wasn't even the type of person who necessarily wanted to see you. But I surely never thought I'd get invited to see you. However, you know my friend Mary Sue very well. She was in charge of all the arrangements the cardinal made for your visit. You probably didn't know her partner, Nancy Jane. Anyway, you were very kind to both of them. They have something on their bureau you gave them. Who are you to judge?

Then, out of the late-summer blue, a letter from Cardinal Dolan came in the mail. The envelope came in the regular, boring mail. It looked much too fancy. The return address was Cardinal Dolan, Archdiocese of New York. I was afraid that it might resemble my last correspondence with the cardinal, which had not been pleasant. That was at the height of the Black Lives Matter trouble in New York. The cardinal had issued an op-ed in the *Daily News*, in which he argued that his constituents, the Irish cops, were not that bad. It

was a sensible and sensitive defense. But it didn't go far enough, in my opinion, to articulate the daily devastations on the street where black people are so disrespected by violence and a culture of fear and harassment.

I published a different point of view, also in the *Daily News*, and the press had their fun watching a Protestant and a Catholic, a woman and a man, differ. I made sure I sent my dissent to the cardinal before I published it in the press. It was a matter of professional courtesy, and he sent me a letter thanking me for the heads-up. So I was familiar with the weight and look of the envelope. The envelope: heavy linen, embossed return address, a sense of the expensive. It was a very kind letter, thanking me for the courtesy of the heads-up. (Even though the cardinal doesn't use that kind of vernacular language, "heads-up," he does have the courtesy of thanking me for the courtesy.)

When an identical envelope appeared in my mailbox with a new message, that I was invited to meet you in New York, I was gobsmacked. I ran around showing the invitation to everyone, bragging insufferably that I was going to meet you. I was already making jokes all over town that I was in love with you and slyly tweaking you for being celibate while I was having an affair with

you. The gender joking was and will remain important, I'm thinking, as our one-sided affair continues.

I even wrote a little story about my excitement, "What to Wear When Meeting the Pope." It made a big splash in my communities, most of whom had been as prepared as I was not to like you. I ending up wearing my clerical collar, of course, ordered from Clergy Couture, a European outfit that dresses ordained women with flair and fit. But, I wondered, should it be paired with a black skirt, the kind you wear to a foundation visit, or blue jeans, just to join your appreciation for those who work "in their quiet ways to sustain our life"? (I love the way you use simple language.) Or what about something with feminist flair, like my pink tights? Too hot for the situation and the season. The skirt won.

By the way, I rarely wonder about what to wear anymore. Wondering what to wear was a window on how important you had become to me. Before our affair, I didn't know how depressed I had been—spiritually, ecologically, and politically. You filled a void in my heart that I didn't really know was there. And you were so full of fullness! I'm almost embarrassed to say so. You are important in such an unassuming way that I doubt you care about how you look. You put the humble in the humility, the gravity in the gravitas.

You're going to put the word *pontification* out of business. You are refreshing religion. You have a bubbly joy in your escape from the security bubble. You are giving Christianity a good name. I never thought I would hear a congressional standing ovation for the Golden Rule, but now I have. Way to go!

Somehow it can't be accidental that the Harvest Moon rose the weekend you visited New York, or that the Muslim holiday Eid started the day before, or that the Jewish holy day Yom Kippur started that Tuesday evening. We were saturated with religion in New York City, with a great rising. And yes, alternate-side-of-the-street parking was suspended all week. Like my skirt, parking is a kind of sacramental preoccupation for those of us hungry for larger epiphanies. You are a large epiphany for me. You know the Latin, *epiphanos*—to be made manifest. I guess I'm really not that surprised about how much you mean to me. What is amazing is how you wowed all of New York City and manifested a glimpse of God to so many of us who had all but stopped looking.

The Day of Your Visit: September 26, 2015

Pope paraphernalia was everywhere for weeks before you arrived. We could buy a Pope Francis bobble head