

His Holiness, Pope Francis
Apostolic Palace
00120 Vatican City

July 1, 2015

Your Holiness,

It is with profound sadness that I write to you today. My partner of 14 years, Margie Winters, was terminated from her job as the Director of Religious Education at Waldron Mercy Academy in Merion, Pennsylvania, a school sponsored by the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas, where she had ministered for 8 joy-filled years. Her offense? She was asked to leave because we are married and, according to Church teaching, living in sin.

Margie, in so many ways, was the soul of that school community and took seriously her responsibility to weave the values of mercy throughout the children's education. Through prayers, liturgies, retreats and service projects the children learned what it means not only to *be* Catholic but to *live* out the values of our Catholic faith and, in particular, the works of mercy. Her passion and commitment to the gospel call of love animated the hearts of hundreds of students over the years who have gone on to root their lives in the God of mercy and justice, and many others who will dedicate themselves to the service of the poor because of the lessons Margie taught them. Lessons the Church taught her and ones she wove into the fabric of her being. How devastating not only to her now, but to the Waldron community, the Sisters of Mercy, and the Church that she will no longer have the opportunity to form more children in the faith to which she has dedicated her life. Never again will she be able to minister in a Catholic institution, and the Church will lose yet another person of deep faith and commitment because they fear individuals like Margie who are simply being true to the God in whose image and likeness they were created. I weep today not only for our personal loss but for the loss suffered by Waldron Mercy, the Sisters of Mercy and for the people of God—the Church. I cannot help but imagine God weeping alongside us at such an injustice.

Your Holiness, as a lifelong dedicated, practicing and participating Catholic, I have through the years been frustrated by the Church's lack of inclusion of women, angered by the elevation of the priesthood at the expense of the laity, felt abandoned by a Church which views my expression of love as sinful, and disgusted by the sinful acts of men in power in a Church that ignored those actions at the expense of our children. And yet, I cannot deny that I hold in tension those emotions against the reality of a life completely and profoundly formed and transformed by this same Church. A Church that cradled me and loved me and birthed God within me. A Church within which I have proclaimed and been challenged by God's Word, a Word that continues to speak to me today. Like many within the Church these tensions have led me to question the integrity of continuing to participate in an institution that does not fully embrace me as lay person, as a woman or as a lesbian. I have "sampled" other traditions, gone to other services, but the rituals of my faith are branded onto my soul and other expressions of

it leave me wanting. While I may decide to “leave” the Church for a time out of frustration and disillusionment, I could never leave the Catholic faith. It is the air I breathe, the blood that runs through my veins. It permeates my entire being. I could no more deny my Catholic identity than I could my own humanity. It is a faith that continues to challenge, inspire and inform my life, and one that strengthens me to be true to the gospel call to serve the poor and the marginalized.

It is from that faith that I write to you today because I believe you to be a man centered in God and profoundly in touch with the Spirit. When you were chosen to be pope and stood on that balcony and asked *us* to bless *you*, I wept along with countless other Catholics who sensed a new day was dawning within the Church. We saw in you a humble man of faith whom God chose to renew the Church. A man who had not sought this elevated position, but one who courageously said “yes” to God, fully understanding the sacrifice such a response would entail. You were called to be prophet and you answered that call by challenging world leaders on issues of capitalism, poverty and the destruction of the earth. You have rebuked the leadership within the Church who misused their power and position to advance themselves and their agendas and protect the institution at the expense of the people of God. Your symbolic gestures of washing the feet of imprisoned women and statements choosing not to judge homosexuals have captured the imagination and attention of the world. I believe that God speaks to you, and that you listen and fearlessly proclaim what has been revealed. What you say and do now matters more than ever before. So I ask you, I beg you, I implore you to ask God to reveal to you the next steps. Not just for Margie and myself, but for the injustices that have been done in the name of our faith against gay and lesbian members of the Church throughout the United States and the world whose only “sin” was to be true to the love God placed within them.

Church leaders denounce our marriage as sinful and immoral much like the Jewish authority in Jesus’ time who excluded the “impure”. But Jesus invited all to the table, saints and sinners alike. He railed against the authority of the time who held to doctrine and tradition at the expense of justice and mercy. His yardstick was a much simpler and straightforward one: “You will know my disciples by their fruit. For a good tree does not bear bad fruit.” He spoke the truth to power and for that he gave his life.

All I ask of the Church now is do as Jesus commanded and examine the fruits of our lives, lives captured and animated by God’s love from the start and dedicated to God’s word and the example of Jesus throughout our lives. An example that led us both to the Sisters of Mercy where we discovered a community on fire with the Spirit, who passionately and faithfully committed themselves to follow in the footsteps of Jesus and Catherine McAuley and to bear witness to the mercy of God’s love in a world so thirsty for it. In Mercy we fell in love—with God, our sisters and one another. In Mercy we were embraced and encouraged to listen deeply to where God’s love was calling us, a call that ultimately would have us discern to leave this community that we so passionately loved in order to honor a deeper calling to center our lives in God’s love and one another.

We have been together ever since and formally and legally pronounced our vows in 2007. As married partners we continue to listen to God's voice challenging us to be of service, for the waters of Mercy run deep within us. A current of love that fully embraced us, freely released us and ultimately welcomed us back to proclaim Mercy to the world as a lay Associate and Companion of the Sisters of Mercy. I suppose God will be our ultimate judge, but I believe we have humbly and faithfully lived out our commitment to God, one another, our community and to our Church. It is with this sure and unwavering belief that I ask you to intervene on our behalf and countless other faithful Catholics so that we may not be condemned to live a life exiled from a Church that we so love and want to serve.

We would be most honored and humbled to meet and share our faith story with you when you come to Philadelphia. In gratitude and blessing for all you have done and continue to do for the People of God.

Always in Mercy,

Andrea Vettori
Companion in Mercy