

Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (<https://www.ncronline.org>)

April 4, 2014 at 1:13pm

Time for Pope Francis to talk to Jimmy Carter

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NCR Today

I had the great privilege of interviewing former President Jimmy Carter for *Interfaith Voices*, on Tuesday, April 1. The occasion was the publication of his new book entitled *A Call to Action: Women, Religion, Violence and Power*.

I came away convinced that Carter and Pope Francis should meet for a serious discussion of the plight of women in the world, and that that conversation should include women's ordination. In fact, I asked Carter directly if he would be willing to participate in such a dialogue, and he said, "Of course, I would."

In fact, in the book, Jimmy Carter reveals that he had already written a letter to Pope Francis on global women's issues and received a reply. Neither Carter's letter, nor the Pope's reply, touched on the question of women's ordination (not surprisingly ... Carter is a Baptist, not a Catholic), but Carter did discuss the global plight of women and urged the Pope to become active on global women's issues. Francis answered with gratitude, indicating that there was need for a "more incisive female presence in the church." (As usual, it's not clear what that means.)

However, Carter noted that, since the publication of his book, four women were among the eight people appointed to a new papal commission to deal with the sex abuse crisis. One of the women was a victim of sex abuse herself. Carter considers those appointments a sign of progress.

In answer to my direct question, Carter indicated that he is impressed with Francis and the freshness of his leadership. He sounded hopeful but realistic in his assessment.

The overall thesis of Carter's book is this: "The most serious and unaddressed worldwide challenge is the deprivation and abuse of women and girls." As one might expect from a man with his international humanitarian expertise, he excoriates the obvious injustices seen in women's higher poverty rate

worldwide, spouse abuse, rape, honor killing, genital cutting, the genocide of girls (because of one-child policies as in China), and child marriage.

But he goes further -- in a distinctly religious direction. He attributes the abuse of women largely to the ?false interpretation of religious texts,? whether those are in the Hebrew Scriptures, the New Testament or the Quran. In the case of Christianity, he makes clear that Jesus fully embraced gender equality, and in the case of Islam, he makes a similar point with the Prophet Mohammed. He is also quite clear that some men embrace these misreadings even after the errors in their interpretations are pointed out, simply because men all too frequently like their sense of superiority, however unfounded.

He also addressed the unequal treatment of women in religious denominations, and favors the full equality of women as pastors, preachers, priests, bishops, rabbis, imams, etc. In fact, he and his wife Rosalynn left the Southern Baptist Convention over issues about the roles of women in the year 2000 and affiliated with the more progressive Cooperative Baptist Fellowship.

Now, the only question that remains: how to set up that meeting between Carter and Pope Francis, and include a couple Catholic feminists to accompany Carter. I?m just sayin?. ?

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