

RADICAL GRACE

Love is blind. Obedience shouldn't be.



EXECUTIVE PRODUCER **SUSAN SARANDON**

INTERCHANGE PRODUCTIONS AND KINDLING GROUP IN ASSOCIATION WITH KATLEI PRODUCTIONS PRESENT A FILM BY REBECCA PARRISH
PRODUCED BY DANIEL ALPERT NICOLE BERNARDI-REIS CO-PRODUCED BY JENNIFER B. WELLS ASSOCIATE PRODUCER LAURA WILSON MUSIC BY HEATHER MCINTOSH
EDITED BY KENJI YAMAMOTO KATERINA SIMIC EXECUTIVE PRODUCER DANIEL ALPERT SUSAN SARANDON DIRECTOR, CINEMATOGRAPHER & EDITOR REBECCA PARRISH

INTERCHANGE PRODUCTIONS  Kindling Group

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Total Run Time: 75 minutes

World Premiere: Hot Docs 2015
U.S. Premiere: AFI Docs 2015

For high-res stills, clips, and additional press coverage please visit:
<http://www.radicalgracefilm.com/presskit>



Logline

When the Vatican reprimands American sisters — citing their “radical feminism” — they become the spiritual and symbolic center of a battle for the heart of the Catholic Church. **Radical Grace** follows three fearless nuns who risk their place in the Church to follow another higher calling: social justice.

Short Synopsis

February 2012: The Vatican officially censures American nuns, putting them under the supervision of conservative bishops. The Vatican’s message is clear: Feminism is simply incompatible with Catholicism, and if you want to remain a part of the Church, you must abandon your “radical” ideology.

The women refuse to back down. Follow Sisters **Simone Campbell**, **Chris Schenk**, and **Jean Hughes** as they challenge the patriarchal system, engaging everyday people in their struggle for equality and ultimately winning the heart of Pope Francis. From their cross-country Nuns on the Bus tour, to serving those on the margins, to a continued struggle for women’s religious equality, these sisters are transforming American politics — and the Church itself.

Collaborating with feminist and faith-based social justice organizations, we will leverage the film to support reform within religious institutions to end gender discrimination of women and girls in the U.S. and around the world and bridge divides to build a stronger progressive and feminist movement.

What people are saying:

“This film comes at a major crossroads in the Catholic Church, and the nuns are everything that’s right with the institution. They stand with the marginalized, and won’t be bullied by a hierarchy that still doesn’t treat them

as equals. I was raised Catholic — and while I couldn't stay in a Church that sidelines women and the LGBT community, spirituality is still an important part of my life. I feel a deep connection to the women featured in Radical Grace and this film will hopefully build a movement towards a more inclusive and just Church, and world."

- SUSAN SARANDON, Radical Grace Executive Producer

"An exhilarating portrait of the 'Nuns on the Bus' that easily ranks among the year's best films ... Radical Grace moved me to tears with its portrayal of good people putting their beliefs into action in ways that transcend all ideological boundaries."

- ROGEREBERT.COM

"Regardless of your religious beliefs, we can all agree to jump on the bus."

- UPWORTHY

"The documentary is a funny, fast-paced window into the battle between U.S. nuns and conservative elements of the Catholic Church over the past four years."

- METRO NEWS TORONTO

"The film — at turns entertaining, educational and inspiring — illustrates profoundly how social justice and spirituality are inseparably linked."

- THE HUFFINGTON POST

"This exhilarating film gives new meaning to the phrase 'holy shit.' Wait till you hear those words coming out of the mouth of one of three Catholic nuns bent on blending their faith with their passion for social justice."

- NOW MAGAZINE (5 STAR REVIEW)

"Is Radical Grace essential festival viewing? A thousand million times yes... It would be A VILE SIN not to see it."

- TORONTO FILM SCENE

"Progressives are hesitant to discuss their faith because it's so demonized. This film helps dispel that fear. The fact that it's framed as a feminist struggle makes it a gateway to talking about spirituality."

- CARMEN RIOS, Online Community Organizer, Feminist Majority Foundation

*"For these three women, of course, the work of justice would have continued with or without the doctrinal assessment. But some of the richest sections of **Radical Grace** come in its exploration of their different responses to the Vatican's criticism."*

- THE NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER

Director's Statement

I'm one of the "nones," part of a growing demographic of religiously unaffiliated millennials. So I could never have predicted that I'd be making a film about ... nuns.

Back in 2011, I didn't set out to make a film about religion. What became **Radical Grace** started out as a project documenting unique acts of social justice. That's how I stumbled into

the amazing work and life of Sister Jean Hughes, who was working with formerly incarcerated felons on the West Side of Chicago. Before that, my image of Catholic nuns was drawn entirely by Hollywood. I thought they all wore habits, lived a cloistered life of prayer and ritual and were very conservative. Sister Jean exploded my stereotypes. Her passion for justice, and deep, irreverent spirituality had me hooked.

I realized that the story of women like her, injecting their spirituality into their work for social change, was something I wanted to share with the world. I realized that even though I don't consider myself a religious person, the most spiritual I have ever felt is when I've participated in social justice work.

So after interviewing hundreds of nuns around the country, I decided to follow the stories of two more incredible women: Sister Simone Campbell and Sister Chris Schenk. And just as I met them, we heard shocking news: The Vatican was reprimanding American nuns for "radical feminism" — for focusing too much on social justice work and not towing the line on homosexuality, reproductive healthcare, and women's roles in the Church. I realized that the very same things that drew me to the sisters were the reasons for the Vatican's attacks. The investigation specifically cited the work of Sister Simone and her organization NETWORK, a progressive lobby in D.C. that had challenged the U.S. bishops by supporting Obamacare.

I filmed as Simone took this news head on. Instead of backing down, she launched a cross-country "Nuns on the Bus Tour" focused on economic inequality in the United States, and we rode along with her from Wisconsin all the way to D.C. Along the way we met with politicians, contended with throngs of supporters and detractors, and we shared the news that the Supreme Court would uphold the Affordable Care Act, legislation that may not have been possible without the cover and support of America's progressive nuns.

In parallel, we followed Sister Chris Schenk, an activist for women's full equality in the Catholic Church. I was enthralled when I met Sister Chris because it had never even occurred to me that activists could work to reform a religious institution from within. It feels silly to say that now, but I had been duped by conservative religious leaders who maintain power by perpetuating the myth that in order to be a person of faith, you must share their beliefs.

I learned that the Catholic Church, or for that matter any religious institution, is not defined by what its clerical leaders espouse, any more than the United States is defined by its president. Rather, it's the people who make up the church. Religious institutions have enormous reach into peoples' lives. Their voice and courage has shown me that women's equality in religious institutions is vital to ending the subjugation of women and girls around the world.

The beauty of documentary is that in not knowing where your story will lead, you learn so much about yourself in the process. I would never have thought that issues grounded in a faith that's not mine, and the stories of these women who lead such different lives than me, would so intensely shape who I am and how I see the world today.

I've realized that regardless of whether you're a Catholic, a Muslim, a Jew, or a "none," the stories of Jean, Chris, and Simone show that you can approach service from a spiritual place in a way that is uniquely nourishing and sustaining. It's not selfless, but is a sharing of community to get the job done together. I've learned so much from their tireless efforts, and

now, our goal is for **Radical Grace** to help pass their energy and their passion on to more activists, helping them find that feeling of communion in their own work.

- Rebecca Parrish

About the Filmmakers



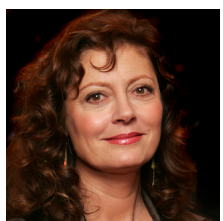
Director Rebecca Parrish is an award-winning filmmaker who has worked with Judith Helfand, winner of Peabody and Sundance awards; Kindling Group, producer of *The Calling*, a groundbreaking PBS series about Catholic, Protestant, Jewish and Muslim Americans who are training for religious leadership; and Kartemquin Films, the producer of legendary documentary films such as *Hoop Dreams* and *The Interrupters*. Rebecca is based in Chicago, IL, where since 2007 she has run her own film company, Interchange Productions.



Producer Nicole Bernardi-Reis has produced television series and films for a wide range of broadcast outlets including A&E, E!/Style, HGTV and the Science Channel. With Montrose Pictures she has produced *Algren*, a feature length documentary on progressive writer Nelson Algren, which premiered at the 2014 Chicago International Film Festival. She credits her passion for storytelling to the nuns at her Adrian Dominican high school, who taught her to always seek the truth and broadcast it as far as you can.



Producer & Executive Producer Danny Alpert is an award-winning producer, director, and leader in using media for change. As Executive Director of Kindling Group, his documentaries (*@home*, *The Calling*, *Do No Harm*, *A Doula Story*) have aired on HBO, PBS, and around the world, sparking engagement campaigns with enduring impact. As co-founder of See3 Communications, Alpert's online media and campaigns for social causes have advanced the work of organizations like UNICEF, World Wildlife Fund, Planned Parenthood, American Cancer Society, and the Kellogg Foundation. The cross-pollination of Danny's documentary and interactive work fuels innovation and his belief in the power media as a tool for change.



Executive Producer Susan Sarandon is a multiple-award-winning actress. Her work includes an Academy Award®-winning and SAG® Award-winning role in *Dead Man Walking* as Sister Helen Prejean, a nun consoling a death-row inmate. Sarandon is also noted for her active support of social causes including economic justice, women's rights, LGBT rights and anti-war efforts. She has been honored for her social justice work as a UNICEF Goodwill Ambassador and as a recipient the Action Against Hunger

Humanitarian Award.

Editor Kenji Yamamoto has worked on award winning dramatic and documentary features including the internationally distributed and acclaimed theatrical dramatic feature film *Thousand Pieces of Gold* starring Chris Cooper and Rosalind Chao. He is an alumnus of Robert Redford's Sundance Institute June lab with *Thousand Pieces of Gold* and documentary feature *New Muslim Cool*.

Editor Katerina Simic brings a perceptive eye and a sensitive touch to storytelling, able to draw out and sustain emotional arcs from a wide variety of materials that encompass humor, truth and drama. Her credits include *JFK: 3 Shots That Changed America*, recipient of several awards including the FOCAL Award for Best Use of Archive and the Realscreen Award for Best Special; and *Witness: Katrina* winner of an Emmy for Outstanding Historical Program. Katerina studied radio/tv/film at Loyola University of Chicago.

Composer Heather McIntosh is House cellist for the Elephant 6 Collective. She has played with Of Montreal, The Olivia Tremor Control, The Music Tapes, Gerbils, Elf Power, Circulatory System, Apples in Stereo, Great Lakes, and The Ladybug Transistor. She has recently moved to Los Angeles from Athens, Georgia.

Co-producer Jennifer Wells joined Interchange Productions as a producer starting in 2010 to help push *Radical Grace* off the ground. The sisters and their communities inspired her so much that in 2012 she moved to New York to study social inequalities in public health at Columbia University. Previously she coordinated outreach for Kartemquin Films' Emmy-nominated documentary *In the Family* and currently works in advocacy for survivors of military sexual assault at Protect Our Defenders.

KatLei Productions provides and facilitates funding for commercial entertainment products including Broadway productions, feature films and documentaries, through private equity investments, low interest loans and charitable donations. Films include: *Life Itself*, *The Trials of Muhammad Ali*, *Grace is Gone*, *The Promotion*, *Drunkboat*, *Ca\$h*, and *The Merry Gentlemen*; Broadway credits include: *Kinky Boots*, *It's Only A Play*, *If/Then*, *Lady Day*, *Rocky*, *Velocity of Autumn*, *Side Show*, *Macbeth*, *Matilda* (national tour) and *Clinton-The Musical* (Off-Broadway). Cast Albums include: *Side Show* and *Peter Pan, Live!*

Long Synopsis

What does it mean for women to be both devoted to and in conflict with a powerful religious institution? Feminists in a patriarchal faith? Why stay? *Radical Grace* follows three extraordinary American Catholic nuns who faithfully honor their vow of obedience to God, even when it means angering the Church hierarchy. The film interweaves their stories to represent the work of the almost 59,000 American nuns.

As modern-day feminist nuns, **Simone Campbell**, **Jean Hughes** and **Chris Schenk** lead very different lives — yet they are united by the common bonds of fierce devotion to their faith and commitment to the Catholic social teachings of justice, equality and freedom from poverty and oppression.

As executive director of NETWORK, a national Catholic social justice lobby founded and run by nuns, Sister Simone advocates for those living on the margins. As the Affordable Care Act moves through Congress in 2010, Simone sends a letter to members of Congress arguing that supporting better access to healthcare is “the REAL pro-life stance.” She organizes the leaders of nuns’ orders across the country to sign the letter, which is critical in bringing Catholic legislators and pro-life Democrats onboard. Those essential votes help the Act pass by a slim margin. She reflects: “I get tears in my eyes just thinking about it because in spite of the trouble with the Vatican, my sisters stood up and said no.”

Sister Chris is the executive director of FutureChurch, a group that organizes Catholics to advocate for women’s leadership in the Church. Seeing a picture of Cesar Chavez in a church, she reflects how her work with the United Farmworkers Union gave her the courage to take on the hierarchy. Chris travels from conferences to parishes, encouraging the faithful to engage in a dialogue for change. Her newest quest: to make it possible for women to serve as deacons, an ordained ministerial role historically occupied by both genders but currently reserved exclusively for men. Chris believes this would bring the church one step closer to having women priests. She rallies her group of church reformers: “We will end the silencing of Catholic women in our church.”

Sister Jean leads a hulk of a man into a conference room at St. Leonard’s House, a residential facility for convicted felons released from prison without resources. Hanging his head down in remorse, he tells her why he spent half his life locked up: In a drug-addled fight, he killed one of his best friends. “I believe that you deserve a second chance,” she tells him. Moments like this, where she witnesses the transformation of a “hopeless” life, have kept Jean going for over 50 years as a nun serving the formerly incarcerated on Chicago’s West Side.

In April 2012, the Vatican formally censures American nuns, criticizing them for spending too much time on social justice issues like poverty and not enough time opposing abortion and gay marriage. The censure — a formal reprimand that is usually reserved for the gravest of sins and spiritual betrayal, such as pedophilia — leaves the sisters shocked and hurt. What did they do to deserve such a severe punishment?

Sister Simone’s NETWORK is specifically mentioned in the censure. “This is politics. This is payback for health care reform,” Simone says. “What the bishops were really angry about was that we did better politicking than they did.” Instead of laying low, Simone chooses to use this notoriety for social good. She organizes a “Nuns on the Bus” cross-country tour. Traveling from state-to-state, the nuns meet with Congressional leaders and rally public opposition to Congressman Paul Ryan’s new austerity budget proposal, which pays for tax cuts by slashing social services. On the House floor, Ryan, a Catholic, claims that his budget is an expression of Catholic social teaching. The sisters plan to prove him wrong.

At a packed kick-off event, Simone gives an impassioned speech that blends hard policy facts with true meaning of Catholic social teaching: “The role of Catholic social teaching is to counter individualism with a keen knowledge of solidarity. The only time we are fully human is when we are connected with each other.”

The public reaction to the censure has also changed the dynamic between the Church’s hierarchy, lay Catholics and the outside world. Having spent the last 30 years looking inward

and solidifying a top down power structure, the institution seems shocked that their hard line decisions are met with more questions – particularly with regard to women’s leadership.

“Jesus did not discriminate,” say Chris. “We have to get the truth out there, to witness what Jesus really did and not what church leaders are saying he did.” Noting that “theology is one thing and history is another,” Chris travels to Rome and leads a pilgrimage to archeological sites with evidence of powerful women leaders who’ve been written out of Christian history. At site after site, the pilgrims see the reflections of their foremothers hidden in plain sight. They see ancient images of women celebrating the Eucharist, a ritual that is reserved for male priests in today’s Catholic Church.

As Chris examines the past, Jean must face her future. In Chicago, a life-threatening lung infection has made her life a revolving door of hospital stays, nurse visits and medication. It has become abundantly clear to Jean that her time left on this earth is short. “Before I could envision some long term approach to changing the institutional church ... But it all of the sudden occurred to me, I am on the other end of the spectrum of what we call life.” In prayer, Jean hears God ask, “Why don’t you walk away?”

Then suddenly, the conservative Pope Benedict resigns. Seizing the moment, Chris joins with the next generation of Catholic feminists to release pink smoke over the Vatican in a prayer vigil turned PR stunt to advocate for the ordination of Catholic women as priests. That night, Chris stands in St. Peter’s square as white smoke billows out of the Vatican, signaling the election of a new pope. Chris is full of hope when she learns that the Pope’s chosen name is “Francis” — after one of the most humble and justice-oriented saints.

Not even the election of “progressive” Pope Francis can bridge the schism between the hierarchy and the nuns. Although he shares the sisters’ mission of mercy and service, in May 2014, the Vatican shockingly reaffirms the censure.

Ever the political analyst, Simone suspects that the rule-bound hierarchy is gearing up for a fight with the new, process driven Pontiff. In the company of her sisters — dancing to the oldies — Simone reflects, the hierarchy could never take away who she is: “They can toss me out. It isn’t going to change who I am. I’m still a Sister of Social Service.”

A simply dressed man — one of Sr. Jean’s “guys” — carries a large flower arrangement into a church. Sister Jean has passed away. Her memorial service is packed: nuns, co-workers, ‘her guys’ have gathered to honor her. At the reception in the chilly church basement, folks huddle around tables, drinking punch and sharing stories. Even though she is gone, the ripple effect of Jean’s life is full of love, strength, and humor. “God bless Jean,” says one of her friends. “And may Jean continue to bless us.”

Crickets chirp on a dark suburban street. It’s 4 a.m. on December 16, 2014. Inside, Chris sits with her roommates at her kitchen table huddled around a laptop. After six years of investigations, the Vatican will announce results of its probe into the lifestyles of all U.S. sisters. In a new policy, they will livestream the announcement on YouTube. As Chris watches, bishops praise the sisters for meeting the needs of the contemporary world and even acknowledge what they’ve learned from these women.

She Skypes with other church reformers who organized the Catholic resistance to the

Vatican's crackdowns: "This came as close as it could to saying, 'we were wrong,'" says Chris. In protests and vigils across the country, Catholics come out in droves to support the sisters. Pressure against the conservative forces was effective. Chris is moved to tears: "To be in a position to help catalyze that movement was one of the biggest privileges I ever experienced. Our struggle was everybody's struggle."

Finally, four months later, the Vatican announces an end to the censure and removes the bishops' oversight of the nuns.

Chris reflects: "We're emerging from a long dark night of the soul in the Catholic Church. We have been carrying a light on behalf of a God who is inclusive, who loves, who welcomes but it's not yet embodied in the structures of the Church. And that is going to be the next big challenge."

The nuns' message of service, community, hope and action has become a rallying cry for people hungry for change — in the Church and in their own communities.

"Things are being shaken up," Simone says. "The way forward is all about being risk-takers: to break-open our lives and to be connected. Being community. Being together. What a radical thought!"