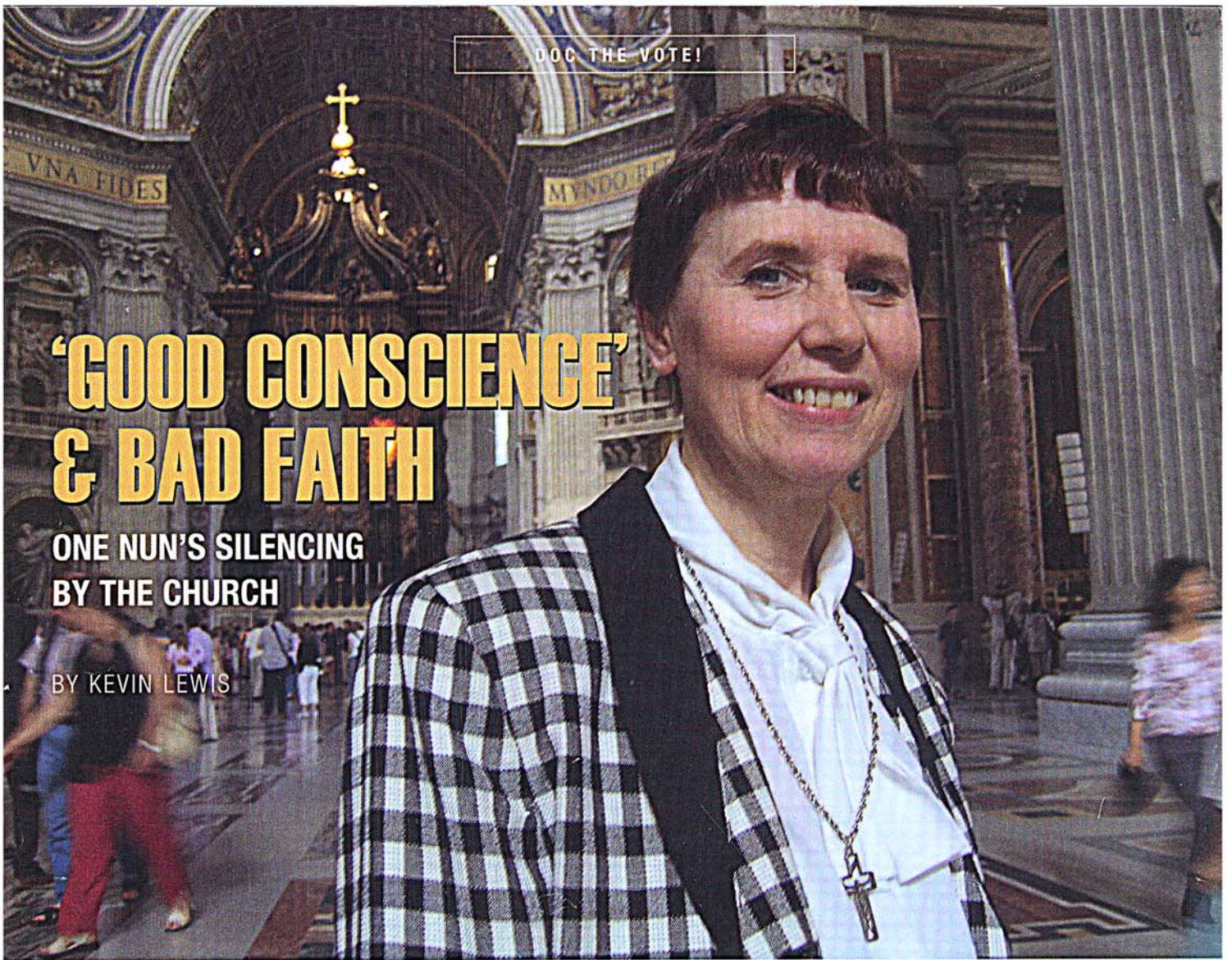


'GOOD CONSCIENCE' & BAD FAITH

ONE NUN'S SILENCING
BY THE CHURCH

BY KEVIN LEWIS



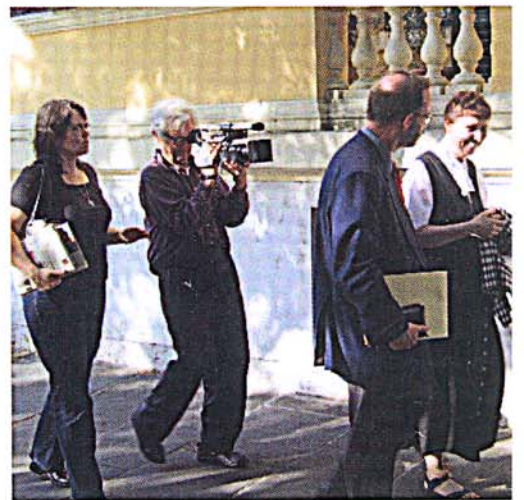
Sister Jeannine Gramick, subject of Barbara Rick's *In Good Conscience*, at the Vatican. Courtesy of Out of the Blue Films.

What draws acclaim to the prize-winning documentary *In Good Conscience: Sister Jeannine Gramick's Journey of Faith* is not so much its surface anti-Catholicism as the realization that the protagonist of the film is a proponent of mankind in the new millennium.

Veteran broadcast journalist Barbara Rick, who has earned a Peabody and an Emmy Award over the years, was initially motivated to make the film after having read a news story about a nun who ministered to gays and lesbians and was being silenced by the Roman Catholic Church. As a Catholic woman, Rick had often felt like a second-class citizen in the male-dominated Church, and she viewed the attack on the nun as an attack on her own situation. She contacted Sister Jeannine and filmmaker Albert Maysles about their interest in a film. Both were enthusiastic, and the legendary Maysles volunteered to shoot the film gratis because he loved the title.

What inspired her during the filming, and what causes audiences to embrace the documentary, is the spiritually centered Sister Jeannine, who gains converts because she never raises her voice. As Rick says, "There is so much hatred at the moment, and so much confrontation over religious and political concepts, that the fact that she can take on her enemies

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Barbara Rick (left) and Albert Maysles, shooting her film *In Good Conscience* in Rome; Sister Jeannine Gramick, the subject of the film is at right. Courtesy of Out of the Blue Films.

without rancor makes her a real radical. It is mesmerizing that she can do what she feels called to do and do it without hate. People are starving for that kind of approach right now."

The film, which begins and ends in Vatican City, develops a Michael Moore-type plotline, which the filmmaker says is unintentional, as Sister Jeannine seeks some answers in high places about her silencing or blacklisting. She never gets her day in court, compromising by leaving a letter and her book *Building Bridges*—which argues for acceptance of gays and lesbian within the Catholic Church—with Cardinal John Ratzinger's secretary at the Vatican. She admits that this is what she expected. Ironically, she had had an unexpected meeting with the cardinal on a plane trip earlier, but would liked to have reinforced her views with him in person.

From her earliest days with the School Sisters of Notre Dame three decades ago, Sister Jeannine organized a ministry that encompassed the gay and lesbian community in her diocese. In recent years, an increasingly rigid Vatican, reacting to the rash of sexual abuse scandals between priests and their young charges, adopted an overt attack on homosexuality. Sister Jeannine was expected to conform to this policy, which she refused to do. Despite the passages in the Old Testament that denounced homosexuality, she regards sexual expression as a natural aspect of human nature. Though the Roman Catholic Church recognized the homosexual nature of a human being, and didn't condemn the homosexual, acting on that sexual orientation was condemned.

As Sister Jeannine says, "It's like saying to a bird, 'Here, you have wings, but you can't fly.'" Her convictions are especially borne out in the finest sequence in the documentary, when she attends the US Conference of Bishops. In her quiet way, she wins over an anti-gay protester who had been opposed to her, and together they take on a more vehe-

ment demonstrator.

At the conference, journalist Andy Humm asks Sister Jeannine if she is a lesbian. She has always refused to confirm or deny this on the basis that her campaign is one based on human rights, rather than personal goals. Ignoring her human rights, and enforcing its hierarchical stamp, the Vatican's Congregation for



Albert Maysles at The Vatican, shooting Barbara Rick's *In Good Conscience*. Courtesy of Out of the Blue Films. Photo: Barbara Rick

the Doctrine of the Faith (formerly the notorious Office of the Inquisition) officially silenced Sister Jeannine. Her order was subsequently forced to turn her out, but she was taken in by the Sisters of Loretto.

What is not brought out in the documentary that she wants to impart is that the School Sisters of Notre Dame had supported this ministry for over 20 years. "That was my assigned ministry in that community," she says, adding that the School Sisters of Notre Dame "did take some pressure from Church leaders and bishops who didn't think it was a good idea. But when it came to the Vatican, I don't think they could withstand that pressure." Without Vatican intervention, the School Sisters of Notre Dame would have continued the ministry.

When it is pointed out that Sister Jeannine may be more Protestant than she thinks, she responds that there is more flexibility among Catholics than non-Catholics realize. She doesn't view this as a Protestant vs. Catholic issue. She believes that the fight is between the fundamentalists, both Catholic

and Protestant, and the liberals of both religious persuasions.

"To me, the Church is the people," Sister Jeannine asserts. "When I say 'Church,' I don't mean hierarchy. In the early Church, we had no hierarchy, but we do need leadership. We don't need a kind of leadership that is modeled on the Holy Roman Empire, which is what we

have today—very medieval. I cringe when I hear people say, 'Well, the Church is not a democracy.' Well, it should be."

Despite such an engaging character as Sister Jeannine Gramick, finding the plotline for the film was difficult, says Rick. She acknowledges that the difficulty lay in the fact that "it is one of those rare cinéma vérité films where there is not a single bit of plot in the footage. I can't tell you how disheartening that can be because we had to create a story

when it was supposed to be there on the tape. Everything that happened in the Vatican was behind closed doors; there's no way to access that. Everything that happened to Sister Jeannine either happened on the phone when we weren't there or was by letter. It's just not a cinéma vérité-type story." And narration was not an option because Rick prefers not to use it.

The filmmaker was lucky that Maysles was as enraptured with Gramick as she was, and that executive producer Tom Fontana was as supportive. Rick says it was wonderful to watch Maysles and Sister Jeannine work together in what she terms "a cinematic romance." "He is a very great humanitarian," Sister Jeannine asserts. "He is a man of conscience, of principle, of justice, and he's just delightful." □

Kevin Lewis is a contributing editor to International Documentary and has written for DGA Magazine and Motion Picture Editors Guild Magazine.