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Sr. Joan Chittister and former Wyoming Republican Rep. Liz Cheney speak on the stage at the Bayfront Convention Center, Oct. 17 in Erie, Pennsylvania. (NCR photo/Rick Klein)



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Former Wyoming Rep. Liz Cheney and Benedictine Sr. Joan Chittister have one thing in common these days: hope.

The lifelong Republican and the acclaimed spiritual leader and author both believe that the soul of America will prevail despite the highly divisive 2024 U.S. presidential election.

They say it will take hard work, collaboration between both sides of the political spectrum and the defeat of Donald Trump to return to a healthy state of affairs.

"I do really believe that at the end of the day, there are so many more Americans who are good-natured, who want compassion in their leaders, who want kindness and good faith. You all have the opportunity to send the message to the world that that is who we are," Cheney told about 4,000 people at an Oct. 17 community forum in Erie.



Sr. Joan Chittister and former Wyoming Republican Rep. Liz Cheney greet each other on the stage at the Bayfront Convention Center, Oct. 17 in Erie, Pennsylvania. (NCR photo/ Rick Klein)

Considered a key battleground state in this year's election, Pennsylvania was an ideal location for these two influential women to put aside political differences and find common ground. And that's what they did at the kickoff event of the Global Summit Speaker Series sponsored by the Erie-based Jefferson Educational Society.

The nonprofit group invites speakers from around the world to address a broad range of globally important issues each year. Its president, Ferki Ferati, eagerly worked to bring Chittister and Cheney together, especially in light of Cheney's best-selling book, *Oath and Honor: A Memoir and a Warning*, which relates her experiences during the violent attack on the U.S. Capitol on Jan. 6, 2021. She was one of only 10 Republicans who voted to impeach Trump for his actions and inaction that day. Consequently, House Republicans removed her from its leadership.

"Sister Joan came to me with the idea that she wanted to have a conversation with Liz Cheney about what it is to disagree on policy but agree on some fundamental things that America stands for," Ferati said.



Sr. Joan Chittister addresses the crowd at the Bayfront Convention Center Oct. 17 in Erie, Pennsylvania. (NCR photo/ Rick Klein)

Chittister led the conversation, drawing in thousands of people familiar with her work advocating for peace, human rights, women's issues and monastic and church renewal. She said she "cheered a little ... and cried a little" reading Cheney's memoir.

"I wanted to stand on a street corner in Erie and read it out loud to people who walked by," Chittister said. "This is something you can't read quickly or superficially."

Chittister lauded Cheney's "moral courage" standing up to Trump and other Republicans who opposed a peaceful transfer of power in 2021. "You did it," she told Cheney. In 2022, Cheney received the John F. Kennedy Profile in Courage Award, with a commendation for her "consistent and courageous voice in defense of democracy."

Such courage continues to be necessary in a turbulent social and political culture. But just as important, both women agreed, is reeducating people about the basics of the U.S. government.



Former Wyoming Republican Rep. Liz Cheney addresses the crowd during an event at the Bayfront Convention Center, Oct. 17 in Erie, Pennsylvania. (NCR photo/ Rick Klein)

Cheney, daughter of former Vice President Dick Cheney, has been active in Republican politics since age 10 when she sealed envelopes with her family for President Gerald Ford's 1976 reelection campaign. She has been traveling throughout the country recently, publicly endorsing Vice President Kamala Harris, the Democratic candidate for president.

She told the Erie gathering at the Bayfront Convention Center that the structure of the government and its separation of powers is "fundamentally crucial, and I would say, miraculous in many ways."

Recognizing Cheney's heartfelt respect for the original framers' intent in establishing a free, democratic republic, Chittister asked Cheney whether an institution, such as government, is "an extension of your own soul … is that soul real or not?"

After a long pause, Cheney said, simply, and with a smile, "Yes."

The two women touched upon the underpinnings of their abiding hope, even in the political realm. In *Oath and Honor*, Cheney describes praying with the House chaplain and others during the most tense, scary moments of the attack on the U.S. Capitol and the House chamber. "I am a firm believer in the power of prayer. I have seen it work in my own life and in the life of our nation," she writes in her book.

Chittister's rich list of award-winning writings on spirituality, including her online column, "From Where I Stand," for National Catholic Reporter, point to her lifelong commitment to justice. She has published her own "Prayer for Leadership" through Benetvision, a resource and research center for contemporary spirituality. It reads, in part:

> 'Give us, O God, leaders whose hearts are large enough to match the breadth of our own souls and give us souls strong enough to follow leaders of vision and wisdom.'

Chittister reminded herself and the audience to counter the angst generated by a contentious political scene by saying: "This is where the energy must begin."

Organizers said the Cheney-Chittister talk was the biggest paid educational event in the city's history. Four days later, Cheney was appearing with Harris in a series of moderated conversations in suburban cities in the battleground states of Pennsylvania, Michigan and Wisconsin.

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Liz Allen, a former Erie City Council member who attended the Pennsylvania talk, said afterward: "We needed to hear optimism tonight. If there's anything the church has taught us, we're supposed to be people of hope."

In Cheney's prepared remarks and while fielding questions from the audience, she addressed her own commitment to fulfilling her obligations as a mother of five

children and as a politician, not quite willing to say what her next political role might be.

"We are, as citizens of this great nation, bound not to take for granted this incredible gift we have inherited and that so many people have sacrificed for over the years," Cheney said, adding, "I have great optimism for this nation in this time that I know is a time of peril."

This story appears in the **Election 2024** feature series. View the full series.