

NUN SENSE

THIS PENNSYLVANIA SISTER OF THE CLOTH HAS A DEER-HUNTING HABIT. AND SHE'S NOT APOLOGIZING FOR IT.

BY STEVE SORENSEN

Last fall, Sister John Paul Bauer, a Roman Catholic nun from the small town of St. Marys, Pennsylvania, shot a 10-point buck.

She posted it to her Facebook page for her brother in Connecticut to see, and the Erie, Pennsylvania, Catholic diocese asked for permission to share it on its own page. From that point on, the news spread like wildfire across the Internet. In less than two days, the photo had 2.1 million hits, thousands of comments and almost 17,000 shares to other Facebook users' own pages.

"We thought it was an interesting way to show that sisters have different interests and talents along with their vocation," noted a spokesman for the Erie diocese. And Sister John Paul is clearly an example of that. (It's customary for a nun to adopt a new name, symbolic of her new vocation. When she became a Benedictine nun in 2002, she took her name from Pope John Paul II, whom she was blessed to meet three times.)

I wanted to ask Sister John Paul about her faith, why she hunts and how the two connect. So I drove to a remote Pennsylvania mountain ridge for a visit. That's where friends of the church provide a home for her and another nun, Sister Jacinta Conklin, also an avid hunter.

Originally a hunting camp, the building has been upgraded for year-round living. It has a kitchen, two bedrooms, a prayer and study room, and a comfortable



Sister John Paul Bauer, who lives in rural Pennsylvania, is proud of the 217-pound 10-pointer she shot last fall. Jeff Crawford of Whitetail Country Taxidermy mounted the trophy. Photo by Steve Sorensen



living room. As I approached the home, I saw a young bull elk with velvet-covered antlers beginning to branch. And while Sister John Paul and I chatted in the living room, two whitetail does grazed in the back yard and wild turkeys scratched for insects in the pines near the garage.

The nun received congratulatory messages from around the world. However, some were hateful. Among the snippets not too vitriolic to print here were:

"A pathetic excuse for a nun who poses proudly for a carnage photo..."

"Psychopathic blood lust..."

"Hunters lack empathy and compassion for other living creatures..."

"What a shame! Hunting is atrocious — as well as killing and exploiting animals — especially for someone who's supposed to be pious..."

Of course, piety has nothing to do with whether or not it's right to hunt, but some



"Lots of people don't understand this, but we kill individual deer for the sake of the entire herd and the other species they share habitat with," Sister John Paul told the author. Photo courtesy of Sister John Paul Bauer

people evidently have trouble with the idea of a nun being a hunter. Computer critics who verbally assaulted this nun apparently know nothing about either Christian theology or hunting.

By contrast, Sister John Paul knows theology — but she's no ivory-tower type who makes a career of avoiding the challenging issues of the world. She was an emergency room/trauma nurse in the U.S. Navy and a Veterans Affairs psychologist who learned to shoot during her military service. She's proud to have served 21 years in the Navy, retiring in 2002 to become a nun. She currently teaches theology and world religions at Elk County Catholic High School.

The nun became well acquainted with hunting while growing up in a devout family in the St. Marys area.

"When I was a girl my father hunted, and I was always so excited to see Dad's enthusiasm when he would come home from hunting," she told me. "Even though I was interested, I never asked to go, because I had the idea that hunting was something girls just didn't do."

Today the sister's father is in his late 80s, and she gives him plenty of reason to be enthusiastic about her hunting. Her fame has spread around the world. But what's largely been missed in the hubbub surrounding an unpretentious nun's harvest of a big Pennsylvania buck is her opportunity to tell the hunting world — and anyone else listening — what hunting means to her and how she blends this lifestyle with her mission as a nun.

This buck was Sister John Paul's third

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since she began hunting in 2003. She also shot a black bear in 2010. What does she think of those who scold her about being a hunter?

"They just don't know what hunting means," she responded. "The benefits of hunting are very positive for the animals. Hunting is a way of life. It always has been. Human nature has not changed, and modern civilization can't make hunting unnecessary."

The nun is well-educated and an avid reader. I asked if she'd read any of the classic literature in wildlife management and ecology, such as Aldo Leopold's *A Sand County Almanac* or any of Theodore Roosevelt's works, or even more recent works on game management.

"No, I read the *Pennsylvania Game News* magazine," she said. "And as you can see from my bookshelves, I read lots of theology."

Much in The Bible speaks to the issues of sportsmen — and women — and it forms the nun's view of hunting.

"Hunting certainly is not condemned in the scriptures," she said. "People often bring up the Sixth Commandment, 'Thou shalt not kill.' The frame of reference is that man is made in the image of God. That makes man special in Creation. The Sixth Commandment is about the taking of an innocent life made in God's image. That's why murder is one of the Ten Commandments. Animals are not made in the image of God, so killing an animal cannot be murder," she said.

Part of the misunderstanding, Sister John Paul said, is a misplaced view of what people call "reverence for life." She told me about long email rants written by a Jainist woman in India, rebuking her for being a hunter. Like Hindus, Jainists teach that all living things are destined for reincarnation.

Hinduism and Jainism have little in common with Christianity. Christians don't teach that life is an endless cycle of reincarnation. The imperfect world cannot be made perfect by man's efforts, and avoiding our responsibility as stewards of the animal kingdom can only harm the natural world. So refusal to kill animals can't be considered a Christian virtue.

"Hunting is a matter of stewardship for Christians," Sister John Paul said. "In the very first chapter of the Old Testament book of Genesis, God assigned man dominion over Creation. In today's world, that dominion includes game manage-


ment. Without hunters as the primary predator of deer, deer have the capacity to overpopulate their range and devastate their habitat. Lots of people don't understand this, but we kill individual deer for the sake of the entire herd and the other species they share habitat with. I saw deer starvation as a child. Overpopulation of deer harms all animals," she noted.

With a budget that can only be called "frugal," Sister John Paul and Sister Jacinta

butcher their own deer. That's a continuation of what they did while living at St. Joseph's Monastery, which closed in 2014. They consider butchering part of the hunt. Sister John Paul's buck weighed 217 pounds field dressed, a hefty body size anywhere and especially impressive for the mountains of Pennsylvania. The venison met the nutritional needs of two families, as well as these sisters. The nuns even handload their own ammunition, as


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Growing up around hunters, Sister John Paul Bauer came to accept it early on. This fine buck is the third she's shot. Photo by Steve Sorensen

they did in the attic of the convent.

Sister John Paul didn't expect a backlash. Hunting is in her blood and that of almost everyone she knows.

"I was very surprised," she said. "Almost everyone hunts here. Many students, coaches and teachers go hunting after school. My students were more excited than I was when school resumed after the Thanksgiving holiday. When the news went viral, they said I was a rock star! Many students wanted to defend me from attackers, but I said, 'No, we're bigger than that, and our silence is far better.'"

The lesson for theology students is that they can be serious about their faith and proud hunters, too.

Sister John Paul was once invited to give a talk at a retreat for teenagers. Her topic? "The Theology of a Tree Stand." She cautions people who believe the woods is a church. "Christians need stillness. We don't have enough stillness, and hunting offers an opportunity to be still with God. But Christians also need community, and you don't get that 20 feet high in a tree stand. So we need the stillness, but we also need all the church has to offer."

I asked Sister John Paul if the photo of her wearing her black nun's habit while holding the antlers of the buck had been

staged. "Not at all," she replied. "I live in my habit. I wear it all the time. I was wearing it under my orange hunting clothes. It's the most comfortable thing I can wear. When the picture was taken, I had simply taken off my outer clothing."

Being a nun is far more than wearing a habit. It permeates all of life. Sister John Paul even prays the rosary while hunting, which she did in her ladder stand before the big buck came along.

"I begin every day with prayer," she said. "On days when I hunt, I don't go with the intent to kill, but the intent to give the day to God. We have so much to be grateful for: health, land, friends and the opportunity to watch the world come alive each morning. When I'm in the woods I take pleasure in seeing mice and birds and every living thing. It's like watching God create all over again."

Finally, Sister John Paul told me she saw the controversy concerning her successful hunt as another opportunity to teach.

"Biblically, women were the initial teachers," she said. "They laid the foundation for all learning by teaching the youngest children in the home. So it's important for women to hunt. Today, women get to do so much more. Women can model respect for the earth and an awe, a fear of God. As for me, I've simply been given this blessing. But it's not about me."

This Roman Catholic nun certainly gives the rest of us hunters — and non-hunters alike — a lot to think about. **NAW**