

Nuns on the Bus sister: Women religious respond to real-world struggles

Simone Campbell | Jul. 2, 2012



Sr. Simone Campbell, executive director of NETWORK, applauds during the group's 40th anniversary celebration in April at Trinity University in Washington. (CNS/Nancy Phelan Wiechec)

COMMENTARY

As a Catholic nun who lobbies on Capitol Hill for the most vulnerable in our society, I'm shocked by the Vatican's recent scrutiny of many women religious. We've been called radical feminists, criticized for supporting historic health care reform and lectured for not speaking enough against abortion. This trial by fire from our own church leaders has left many Catholic sisters shaken but not discouraged. Inspired by faith and buoyed by supporters from across the country, we remain committed to Gospel values: healing the sick, feeding the hungry, welcoming the immigrant.

Some might prefer that we sit down and keep quiet. Instead, we just finished a nine-state bus tour to highlight the critical work Catholic sisters do in leading anti-poverty initiatives and calling attention to a Republican budget that the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops has criticized as failing a moral test.

Our two-week trip through cities, small towns and rural communities may call to mind Robert Kennedy's 1968 poverty tour through Appalachia. By shining a spotlight on those living in the shadows of the American dream, we hope to provoke a better debate about values and economic policies in this critical election year. This is especially urgent now that the GOP House budget cuts food stamps and targets health care for the elderly even as it coddles the wealthy with irresponsible tax breaks.

Rep. Paul Ryan, R-Wis., the architect of this draconian plan, even claims this budget reflects the values of his Catholic faith. This is outrageous. For centuries, Catholic social teaching has insisted that the free market must serve human dignity, not simply profit margins. Catholic values simply don't fit with the anti-government philosophy espoused by the tea party or a libertarian ideology that puts extreme individualism before our collective responsibility to care for neighbors in need. It's troubling to see prominent Catholics like Rep. Ryan and House Speaker John Boehner fail to realize that being pro-life does not stop at protecting life in the womb. An economic agenda that asks those who are already hurting to pay an even greater toll is nothing less than an

assault on human dignity.

I'm grateful Catholic bishops have sent strongly worded letters to Congress denouncing this budget. But letters are not enough. I'm hoping some bishops will join with us and summon the same moral outrage they have demonstrated on hot-button issues like birth control and same-sex marriage to speak up in a more robust way about rising poverty, attacks on workers' rights and an unjust tax system that benefits the wealthiest Americans.

Pope Benedict XVI has warned about the "scandal of glaring inequalities" between the rich and poor. Bishops in the 1980s were bold leaders on economic justice. We need more prophetic leaders who can speak truth to power, challenge both parties and put the common good back at the center of our political debates.

The Vatican may describe Catholic nuns as radical feminists. I think we're simply responding to real-world struggles. Women religious minister every day in hospitals, prisons, universities and soup kitchens. You can find us in corporate boardrooms advocating for ethical financial practices and in state legislatures lobbying lawmakers for more humane treatment of immigrants. We shelter the homeless and feed the hungry, but also advocate for more just public policies because charity alone is not enough. In a society divided by culture wars, we walk with those who are the least, the last and the lonely as Jesus taught us.

We think that's a message worth taking on the road.

[Social Service Sr. Simone Campbell is executive director of NETWORK, a national Catholic social justice lobby.]

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