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Nuns on the Bus

by Michael Sean Winters

Distinctly Catholic

The "Nuns on the Bus" have begun their second nationwide bus tour, this year calling attention to the need to pass comprehensive immigration reform. The bus tour is sponsored by NETWORK, the social justice lobby organized and run by religious women. Their executive director, Sr. Simone Campbell, is well known to NCR readers for her efforts to promote public policies that assist the poor.

The Nuns on the Bus generates a unique level of enthusiasm, both at the grassroots and elite levels. Everybody loves the sisters. Well, almost everybody. Bill Donohue of the Catholic League issued a press release that lambasted NETWORK as "a Catholic dissident group." Of course, these women have devoted their lives to the service of the poor in the name of the Church. Of course, their press releases about the bus tour specifically state that they are "standing with our bishops" in the push for immigration reform. I suppose that in Donohue's world, dissent from Republican Party orthodoxy is more or less the same as dissent from Catholic teaching, so in his mind, the charge fits.

Donohue gets more specific. He claims that the sisters "expressly eschew commenting on abortion." A similar complaint found its way into the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith's "doctrinal assessment." It is a strange claim, a little like complaining that Richard Doerflinger, the USCCB's point man on pro-life issues, "expressly eschews commenting on anti-poverty programs." The division of labor is not evidence of a lack of concern. And, in the event, anti-poverty programs are pro-life programs because poverty remains the leading abortifacient in America today.

Mr. Donohue's suspicions of the Nuns on the Bus were evidently not shared by Bishop David M. O'Connell, CM, of Trenton. Yesterday, O'Connell met up with the Nuns on the Bus when they got to his diocese, joining them for a prayer service at St. Ann's Church in Lawrenceville. At the prayer service,

Bishop O'Connell called attention to a recent letter from the bishops of New Jersey on immigration reform, stating, "the principles embraced in that letter and our recent statement flow not from politics or any partisan agenda but from the Gospel, from Jesus Christ." He continued, "I am not political. I am a person of faith who shepherds a local Church. Our Church is pro-life, pro-family and pro-poor. I lend my prayer and encouragement to the cause of comprehensive immigration reform in which all three of those causes are united. Now is the time to take action, now is the time to welcome brothers and sisters as strangers no more." Maybe Bishop O'Connell can give Donohue a tutorial on Church teaching in this regard.

There is no denying there has been tension between the religious women of America and some bishops on a range of issues for many years now. But, how wonderful it is to see all that being put in context, and set aside, to join in a common effort to push for immigration reform. I would call readers attention to those two letters that follow Bishop O'Connell's name, "CM," the Congregation for the Missions, the Vincentians. O'Connell joined the congregation as a young man and remains a member even as he is now a bishop. The spirituality of the Vincentians is rooted in helping the poor because that is what Christ commanded us to do and, just as importantly, it is among the poor that we encounter Christ. If this is heresy, then we have a real problem on our hands, and the thousand upon thousands of Vincentians across the world - the order includes the Daughters of Charity - probably have earned the sobriquet "dissident" too.

To be clear: O'Connell is not someone I would call a "liberal." The Church's commitment to the poor transcends such ideological labels. That is a good reason to be a Catholic. You can see the photos Bishop O'Connell posted of the event [here](#).

Last year, the Nuns on the Bus focused on the injustices in the Republican House budget. Then, as now, the sisters expressly stated that they were standing with the bishops, the elected representatives of whom had written to Congress denouncing the same cuts in services to the poor that the sisters denounced. The situation was complicated by the fact that the budget was the work of Cong. Paul Ryan, a darling of some bishops. This year, there are no such complications and I hope more bishops will come out and stand with the sisters.

Catholics are not the only ones supporting the Nuns on the Bus. President Obama had Sr. Simone into the Oval Office yesterday. Me? I would rather have a chat with Bishop O'Connell than with President Obama. But, how great to not have to choose!

One of the benefits of being in D.C. is that you get to meet people like Sr. Simone. You only have to spend five minutes with her to realize how deeply her work is informed by her commitment to the Gospel. Yes, in times gone by, religious sisters helped the poor by running hospitals and soup kitchens and shelters, all of which they still do. Now, in addition, they help the poor by studying legislation (Sr. Simone has a law degree) and lobbying Congress. It is the same work, the work of the Lord. And, Sr. Simone is not that different from, say, her nineteenth century predecessors. Then, as now, religious women were often the most highly educated women in any community, certainly charged with extensive responsibilities, and quite capable of standing up to the men who got in their way. Sr. Simone is a powerhouse for the poor. I am sure that her predecessors are looking down approvingly from Heaven.

I encourage everyone to support the Nuns on the Bus. I also encourage everyone to write to their bishop and encourage him to support the Nuns on the Bus and to write a letter of thanks to those who do. Immigration reform is an issue that should unite all Catholics, bishops, sisters, laity, liberal, conservative, Democrat, Republican, everyone. We are fighting for justice. We are fighting for our co-religionists, for our people. And, at a deep, deep spiritual level, we are fighting for our own souls, forging within

ourselves a renewed commitment to the Kingdom in which no one is a stranger.

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