

Ruben Rosario: Catholic nun pursues social justice with a bold tongue

By Ruben Rosario rrosario@pioneerpress.com TwinCities.com-Pioneer Press

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Sister Simone Campbell no tiene pelos en la lengua. Literally translated, the words mean "not having hairs in the tongue." But in Spanish, it actually means not being afraid or hesitant to speak one's mind or conviction, although in her case, the woman behind last summer's "Nuns on the Bus" tour sure does it in a nice Christian way.

So when an audience member at a gathering in St. Paul last week asked her why liberal progressives were, compared with conservatives, so bad at simple, effective messaging, she recounted a conversation between a friend of hers and a member of the conservative Heritage Foundation.

"The problem with progressives is that you all never talk about family, God or country," the man said, according to Campbell. "All you talk about is programs. If you want to move hearts, you have to talk about family, God and country."

Campbell, also a lawyer who spent 18 years running a family law clinic for the poor and indigent in Oakland, Calif., absorbed the truth behind the assessment.

"I did not understand why 'Nuns on the Bus' was the electric jolt that it was," Campbell told the audience, "but I realized that's what 'Nuns on the Bus' did -- talk about family, God and country in a way that was compelling."

Campbell is a woman of the cloth relentlessly advocating for the poor and on a tireless mission to raise awareness about a widening income gap in this nation because, the way she sees it, it's unpatriotic, un-American and downright immoral.

She's no doubt a polarizing figure in the Catholic community, if not also outside it. Progressive thinkers inside the church praise her as a true follower of the teachings of Jesus and a crusader for economic and social justice. So-called "traditional" conservatives look on her as a heretic, a blasphemer who is pushing a radical feminist agenda that conflicts with Church doctrine.

Geez, the Pharisees pretty much said the same things about Jesus, who in turn pushed back, calling the Jewish sect hypocrites and admonishing them for enacting self-serving, man-made rules and passing them off as the word of God. Sound familiar?

Campbell is aware of accusations that she is a lefty, what I would term a NINO (Nun in Name Only), and a socialist who supported the Affordable Health Care for America Act, better known as Obamacare. She served on the president's advisory board and some, including President Barack Obama, believe her "nun's letter" on the reasons why it would better serve the poor and uninsured helped push the bill to passage.

She responds not by citing the Gospel, but the Constitution.

"It's 'we the people' of the United States forming a more perfect union," Campbell told me during a break in a presentation at the Sisters of St. Joseph of Carondelet Center in St. Paul that attracted an overflow crowd.

"We are all in this together," said Campbell, executive director of Network, a Catholic nun-inspired social justice lobbying group based in Washington, D.C.

"We have a responsibility to each other, and that is what democracy is," she added. "The way we exercise democracy is called government. To form a more perfect union requires helping those who fall through the cracks."

She brought up the famous line, attributed to many including Pearl S. Buck, that the test of a civilization is the way that it cares for its helpless members. It's how best to do that caring that has become a culturally as well as politically divisive issue in recent years.

But Campbell agrees with Minnesota Budget Project head Nan Madden, who also spoke at the gathering, that America has lost a sense of shared values. One blatant example of this is the growing income disparity.

"We believe that hard work should pay off, that people who work hard and play by the rules should be able to support their families, and we believe that in this country you should have the opportunity to succeed," Madden said. "But as the gap widens, we become isolated from each other and it undermines our sense of shared destiny."

TRICKLE-DOWN WAS TRICKLE-UP

Campbell noted that between 1949 and 1979, "everyone's income in the U.S. went up about 100 percent," she explained. "The bottom 20 percent went up 116 percent. The top went up 86 percent."

Talk about socialism. During those years, the highest individual income tax rate was more than double the rate today.

Times have surely changed. Trickle-down economics, as Campbell noted, turned out to be a lie and "a shift of money to the top."

There is no question the poor are getting poorer, wages are falling behind inflation and the gap between the rich and poor has never been wider.

Between 1979 and 2003, the income of the top 1 percent of households grew by 275 percent. The bottom one-fifth grew by 18 percent. We have a larger income gap than France, Poland or even Greece, now mired in economic collapse. Workers' real average hourly wages have not increased in 50 years, while the highest-income households have enjoyed the sharpest drops in tax rates since 1960.

When the U.S. Conference of Bishops came out with a statement that Republican vice presidential nominee Paul Ryan's budget proposal "failed the basic moral test" because it would harm the poorest families, Campbell not only agreed but took to the road to get the point across.

On the 15-day tour, she visited 32 mostly poor and working-class communities in nine states.

'TROUBLEMAKER' CARRIES ON

Campbell was not surprised that all but one of those same bishops stayed mum about the bus tour. First, they opposed Obamacare, the same bill she championed as a "pro-life" measure. And, two months earlier, their boss, the Vatican, publicly chastised and admonished the Leadership Conference of

Women Religious, a group representing most American nuns, for spending too much time on social justice issues and not enough railing against abortion or gay marriage.

Campbell is a member of the Sisters of Social Service, a Catholic order that takes vows of poverty and chastity in its core mission of serving the poor. Its founder was a nun in Hungary who became a member of Parliament and helped organize a women's suffrage movement in that country. Campbell thought the Vatican rebuke was a low blow, and she made her feelings known.

"I think we made him nervous," Campbell said of Pope Benedict XVI, who stepped down last month. "We engaged with the people and were seen as credible leaders."

Campbell humorously describes her order, and by extension outspoken nuns working with the poor, as "troublemakers, all of us." Perhaps what we need more of are like-minded troublemakers who don't have hairs in their tongues.

Ruben Rosario can be reached at 651-228-5454 or rrosario@pioneerpress.com. Follow him on Twitter [@nycrican](https://twitter.com/nycrican).

ONLINE

To learn more about Sister Simone Campbell's Network group, go to www.networklobby.org.

To learn more about the Minnesota Budget Project, go to www.mnbudgetproject.org.