



# Religion and Politics

By *Simone Campbell, SSS*

I LIVE AT THE intersection of politics and religion.

I am a Catholic Sister. I lead a faith-based lobby in Washington, DC. I have a contemplative practice that grounds who I am—and I am deep into the details of federal policy. It could not get more intersectional than this.

I am a member of the Sisters of Social Service, based in California. We were founded in 1923 in response to Pope Leo's encyclical *Rerum Novarum*, the foundation of Catholic Social Teaching. Our call is to do the "social mission of the Church." In Budapest, our foundress, Margaret Slachta, was the first woman in the Hungarian Parliament. So, from our founding, we have known that our faith takes us into the public square.

One of the documents that Margaret wrote for us is entitled, *From the Hermitage of the Desert to the Center of Life*. Her vision is that we are called to be "rooted in the Holy Spirit," grounded in a contemplative

life, and “sent on unbroken roads, trusted with the problems of today and tomorrow.” It is this vision that has flowered in my life and that of my community.

I currently lead NETWORK Lobby for Catholic Social Justice, based in Washington, DC. We were founded by forty-seven Catholic Sisters from various communities in 1971 and opened our doors in 1972. We lobby on Capitol Hill on issues of income and wealth disparity in our nation. We are working in seven policy areas to “Mend the Gaps.” One hundred thousand of our supporters around the country join us in the daunting project of shaping federal legislation. We have gotten some notoriety for our Nuns on the Bus campaigns and our work on healthcare legislation. At NETWORK, we often say that our care for the common good is care for “the 100%” instead of the 99% or the 1% or any other number.

This all seems rather straightforward. Take the Gospel to the public square and work for the sake of those living in poverty. In *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis says, “Growth in justice requires more than economic growth, while presupposing such growth: it requires decisions, programs, mechanisms and processes specifically geared to a better distribution of income, the creation of sources of employment and an integral promotion of the poor which goes beyond a simple welfare mentality.”<sup>1</sup> This is the twenty-first-century political challenge of our work—making faith alive in our rather messy politics.

My meditation practice has led me to see that God is alive in all. No one can be left out of my care. Therefore this political work is anchored in caring for those whom we lobby as well as those whose cause we champion. This was illustrated for me recently when I was with four of my colleagues lobbying a Republican Senator on healthcare legislation. I commented on the story of a constituent and asked her how her colleagues could turn their eyes away from the suffering and fear of their people. The conversation went on a bit, and then the senator came back to my question. She said that many of her colleagues controlled access for those with whom they met. They did not get close to the candid stories of their people. In fact, some did not see these constituents as “their people.” Tears sprang to my eyes at her candor and the pain that keeps us sealed off from each other because of political partisanship. Compassion spills out of safe containers to flood our lives.

It is breaking my heart that some of these same politicians want to dismantle healthcare and force millions of our people off of healthcare

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they receive through the Affordable Care Act. Pope Francis is correct when he says that “health is not a consumer good, but a universal right, so access to health services cannot be a privilege.”<sup>2</sup> Some in Congress want to take away healthcare coverage in order to make a partisan point. It is these members of Congress that I have a difficult time caring about. I would love to push them out of my care.

However, I find our position “for the 100%” requires an empathy that stretches my being beyond my imagining. Finding a way to not vilify or divide into “them” and “us” in today’s federal politics goes against all of the pollsters’ and pundits’ advice and current custom. I too want to decry the current administration’s policies and practices that demean so many and are tearing our nation apart.

So my contemplative practice is to attempt to sit open-handed and listen to the “wee small voice” that sometimes whispers ideas and ways forward. Following the conversation with the senator, I held her anguish in my silence. What came to me was a way to attempt to break through this wall that some have built around themselves, sealing them off from their constituents’ pain and fears. As a consequence, we at NETWORK gathered pictures and stories of people from key states and delivered them to the healthcare policy staff of their states. We did this in order to make the reality of their constituents vivid before their eyes. I don’t know if this made a dent in their wall of seeming indifference, but I know that it gave me and our organization the opportunity to exercise our care for the 100%—including senators who might vote against their constituents’ interests.

My faith impels me into the public square. It is abundantly clear that Pope Francis is correct when he says that faith has real consequences in the world...and these consequences involve politics. *But*, what I find daunting and painful are the politics within my religion—the Roman Catholic Church.

Some of the leaders of our Catholic Church have staked out civil political positions on issues of abortion and gay marriage that are rigid and seemingly shaped in fear and anger. These positions have been identified as *the* Catholic position and are filled with judgment and condemnation. Not only that, they have been defined as the only positions about which Catholics are supposed to care.

When I was newly at NETWORK, I was going on the Hill to lobby about development aid for Iraqis in the aftermath of our 2003 invasion. While I had explained to the scheduler what we wanted to talk about with the staffer, the scheduler assumed that since I was Sister Simone that I wanted to talk about abortion. Therefore the appointment had been set with the staff member that covered abortion, not the one who handled international aid! It was straightened out after we briefly talked at cross purposes, but it underscored for me how “Catholic” and “anti-abortion” have been equated.

While we have worked at educating Capitol Hill staff about the broader issues we address, there is an additional consequence that at times overshadows our Gospel advocacy. Because of the extreme view of some Church leaders and their staffs, many Catholic institutions will not collaborate with any organization that has interaction with organizations that have a different view on these two defining, but narrow, issues. This is true even if abortion and LGBTQ rights are not the legislative issues at hand.

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My prayer has led me to reject this rigidity as I have come to know that reflection on the Gospel leads to compassion. Compassion often leads to much more nuanced analysis, but nuance is not comfortable for those who feel the need to teach in absolutes and extremes. As an aside, I have a hunch that some in Church leadership think that enforcing the rules is the only option for spiritual leaders. Pope Francis has demonstrated another approach, but it has not penetrated some people's perspectives.

As I was preparing to write this piece, our organization was asked to be a co-sponsor of a campaign that included Planned Parenthood and NARAL (National Abortion and Reproductive Rights Action League). The campaign is one to protect Medicaid, which serves some of the most vulnerable people in our nation. Medicaid is the focus of much of our advocacy in the healthcare policy debate, so it would be natural to sign on. But Catholic institutional leaders (claiming the pro-life mantle) have labeled both Planned Parenthood and NARAL as the center of pro-choice abortion rights activism and a pariah in our society.

This invitation became "Exhibit A" of this Church-politics discussion.

My contemplative challenge is that I, as a Catholic who is committed to the dignity of all life, live at an intersection where these choices are not so clear-cut. I know that Planned Parenthood is the sole source of health services for many women throughout our nation. When I practiced family law in California, many of my clients used Planned Parenthood's services for their healthcare needs. A small percentage of Planned Parenthood's work is actual abortions. NARAL advocates for women's rights and expanding the capacity to have their voices heard. For me, both of these missions enhance the dignity of women's lives and further my pro-life stance of working for the dignity of all creation. So, after consultation with staff, we signed on to be a co-sponsor of an effort to protect Medicaid funding for low-income families.

This more nuanced approach comes out of my prayer and call to care for the 100%, but it does come at a price. Personally, for me, it has resulted in some institutional Church people attacking me for allegedly being pro-abortion. Our organization has been cited by Rome as promoting "radical feminist themes incompatible with the Catholic faith."<sup>3</sup> I cannot speak on Church property in some dioceses in the United States because of this. I find all this very painful at times.

But the deeper truth is that my pain often comes from having had unmet expectations of how I should be received or that institutional leaders would talk to me or ask about my views. My prayer led me to see that beneath these expectations were my effort at control and desire to be accepted.

Holding a care for the 100% at the center of my meditation led me to see that the rejection by some institutional leaders forced us into settings where we would not otherwise have gone. Because of not being able to speak on some Catholic properties, we have been catapulted into the interfaith and secular setting. We bring the message of faithful inclusion to people who would not otherwise hear it.

The gift of the Spirit is that the rejection has pushed us into the sea of people who are hungry for spiritual nourishment but often turned off by rigid hierarchical religious structures. The Spirit has pushed us out of our comfort zone of acceptability in order to meet the needs of people we had not known were ours.

In many ways, we are a bit like the senators who close themselves off from the needs of their constituents. We could get caught in the pain of rejection and blame, fighting against an unjust judgment. But for me, the contemplative perspective leads to letting go of my desires and control while opening to the gift of the moment. My consistent learning is that behind the loss is always a surprise, opening into something new. There are prices to be paid, but they are small when compared to the hunger of our people.

Religion/politics is at the heart of my contemplative practice. I am nourished daily by the people I meet and whose stories I hear. My heart is broken open by the truth of their hunger and hope. It is not a theoretical reality for me. Rather, it is the proclamation of the Gospel: Go and preach the good news! The blind see! The lame walk! So my meditation has become breath, that we might see, that we might walk, and, in the process, heal our society that is famished for community and knowing that we belong to each other.

Let us pray together: Come Holy Spirit. Fill the hearts of your faithful and enkindle in us the fire of your love! ♦