



ELEPHANTS IN THE LIVING ROOM

Website: elephantsinthelivingroom.com



SR. SIMONE CAMPBELL, S.S.S.

**CATHOLIC SOCIAL TEACHINGS
AND THE POOR
THE MERCY CENTER
FARMINGTON HILLS, MI
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Introduction

Bishop Thomas Gumbleton

Today, I would like to introduce Sr. Simone Campbell. I am sure on other occasions you have heard a person giving an introduction say, "Our speaker really doesn't need an introduction." And sometimes that's more or less true. But today, it is certainly true. I think everyone in this room surely is aware of Sr. Simone Campbell. She burst onto the national scene some time ago, and has been present there ever since. You may have seen her on being interviewed with Bill Moyers on National Public Television; or maybe you saw her go sort of one on one with Stephen Colbert, (laughter) really matching him quip for quip, and also perhaps you heard her speech at the Democratic National Convention (applause). I discovered that not only were all of us so enthusiastic about it, but also President Obama called her on the Saturday after the convention to thank her; and I think that really indicates what a great speech it was. And then, of course, we're all aware of *Nuns on the Bus* that Sr. Mary Ellen Howard spoke about; and it was a stroke of genius, and something that our Catholic Church will never get over, I think (laughter).

But who is this person, Sr. Simone Campbell? Well, first of all, I discovered she's really a person of prayer, deep prayer. And she uses her Bible every day for her prayer book, which is something all of us should probably do, to really listen deeply to God's word, to let it form and shape us and guide us. And so Sr. Simone prays in that way; and I'm sure that's what makes her the magnificent person she is. But she's also a poet, something that surprised me, because I usually don't think of poets and attorney's being the same person. (Laughter) But I know of an occasion in El Salvador, when she was down there with a delegation of people, and after a very intense day of readings and being with people oppressed and violated in various terrible ways, the group came together to kind of unwind and share their experiences of the day, to debrief, and each person spoke about what he or she had experienced. But Sr. Simone had a poem that she developed there on the spot, practically, and really captured the feelings and the insights of the group, and in a poetic but very deeply true way.

But besides being a woman of prayer, deep faith, a poet, she is an attorney. Her life in the law has been mostly engaged with public policy law. She founded in 1978 *The Community Law Center* in Oakland, California; and she was the lead attorney for that law center for 18 years. Most of their cases had to do with family law and with the poor, especially the working poor. Later, she became the Executive Director of a community interfaith organization called *Jericho*; and that organization also was involved in public policy issues and working for the poor. In 2004 she became the Executive Director of NETWORK, which is a United States organization started by nuns from the United States in 1971. NETWORK is a public policy and lobbying group that was developed as a result of the Synod document of 1971, *Justice in the World*; the document that calls all of us to do action for justice, because, as the document says, action for justice, participation in the transformation of the world, these are constitutive dimensions in the preaching of the gospel, the living of the gospel. Action for justice, transforming our world, that is what NETWORK is about; and Sr. Simone has been its Executive Director since 2004. She's a member of the Sisters of Social Service in California. In fact, she served as their Director, their President, for a number of years. And in that role she visited their communities in Mexico, Taiwan, and the Philippines, and throughout the United States.

More than anything though, besides being all of these things that I have described, I think Sr. Simone is really a model for U. S. nuns in the 21st Century. May God grant that we have thousands and thousands of nuns like Sr. Simone. (Applause) So I ask you to welcome Sr. Simone. (Applause).

Catholic Social Teachings and the Poor

Sr. Simone Campbell, S.S.S.

Thank you so much - oh my gosh, look at this crowd! Well, the plane out of Washington, D. C. Reagan National - and it was fairly surprising to actually get here a little bit early - and so I need all of this energy to help me on the rest of the trip, because I go from here to Des Moines tonight, because we're doing a day-long Nuns on the Bus in central Iowa tomorrow. And then your energy is needed to get me back to D. C. late tomorrow night, because we're doing a *Nuns on the Bus Virginia* tomorrow. (laughter) And then I need your energy to get me up to, God help me, Staten Island, who's had a little trouble. So Saturday I'm supposed to be in Staten Island so anyway, prayers for all of this. It is a deep honor to be here; and I have outlined a little presentation, talk, all of this stuff. But since the group is called *Elephants in the Living Room*, and I come from a social work community, where we always try to not IGNORE the elephants in the living room, (Laughter) hopefully, some of this will be of help in stirring up, okay? I love the prayer service to start. I mean it's so fabulous to ground ourselves in really what is the gospel mandate for what it is that we are called to. Now, I understand, among us, while most of us might be of the Catholic persuasion, there's some other non-Catholics, or as some people on the bus trip told me, "Sister, we love your message; it's really great; but it's the religion part I don't quite get, you know?" (laughter) So whether you're with us on the message and the faith, or just the message, know that it really is about all being welcomed into the story, and coming from, what I call my spirituality, is the contemplative practice where all are welcome.

Last December - I do a Christian Zen centering prayer type thing - and our retreat director, Pat, a Redemptorists priest, down in a Picture Rocks Retreat House, down in Tucson, Arizona. He is generally laid back and lets me evolve and kind of bobble on, but this last December he pushed me really hard to deal with radical acceptance. Radical acceptance, "That's nuts," you know, that was my response. So he sent me out on that journey; and the reason he pointed me in that direction because, "Isn't what you're doing about needing to understand people who are different?" "Well, yah, but you didn't have to point it out. I do that every day in my day job. Why do I have to do it on retreat?"

So he pushed me, and what happened as a result is, that I came to know that if I'm at odds with the God in someone else, I'm at odds with the God in me. And I had to come to that place of knowing we were one even the people that I think really were God's mistakes (Laughter) - God on an off day (Laughter). But to find out that the spiritual practice of the gospel is about being open always to everyone. And for me, because I lobby in D.C., the measure of that is even Mitch McConnell or even Eric Cantor or even - well there's a whole slew of them (laughter). It just shows my limitations and God's amusement. But, what I came to know is, that to radically accept them is to know that they indeed hold a piece of the truth. Ugh! And so I wrestled with that, and then I came to that lovely spiritual place where you're at one with all, you know, the flowers are beautiful; the grey sky is wonderful; God is alive among us; isn't it wonderful? (laughter) So I go into conference with Pat and he says "Okay now add in fighting". "Fighting? You mean like f-i-g-h-t-i-n-g fighting?" "Yeah! Isn't that what you do?" "Well, yeah, I do; but I thought I was going to have three days of glorious spiritual calm." But he pushed me to integrate fighting. Oh! And as I was ranting and raving, he said, "Well?" And he sends me off and says, "Go! Go! It's a good thing retreat's not over yet." And so I go off and I engaged again the unity of radical acceptance and fighting.

And what I came to know as a spiritual truth is that that unity is fire. That unity of radical acceptance and fighting is like the fire in a crucible, the refiner's fire, where you've got both fuel, and heat, and light, and ash, and struggle, and engagement, all in the same moment. And soon after the Vatican assessment came down on April 18th - not that anybody remembers the date or anything - but, (laughter) you know, our little organization - we only have nine full time staff - was named as a suspect organization for the Leadership Conference of Women Religious (laughter). We really must make them nervous, which is kind of amusing, you know? But I know what it is: we made them mad in the health care debate, but we'll talk about that later.

But what came to me is the image though - very quickly - was that I believe in this moment that we're called to be the burning bush. We are called to be the faithful place in the desert, where God can flame up in our lives, where God is alive and well, and is calling far beyond anything, anything that we could ever, ever imagine. And I don't know who all's called to be the burning bush; and sometimes I sure hope it's more than just us, because it makes me nervous to claim this, but the truth is when you hear this it is Yahweh, our God, says, "I have indeed seen the misery of my people. I have heard them crying for help on account of their task masters. Yes, I am well aware of their suffering; and I have come down to rescue them." It is our God who knows the struggle in time. It is our God who knows the elephant better than we do. It's our God who loves us first, last and always. And it's us trying to be in that faithful place, where our loving God can flame up in us, so that it can be a sign to others, it can be heat in the cold night, can be a light in the darkness, can be what we need in a moment of tension and uncertainty. So, all of us, in a sense, get caught into this, of being the place where God can flame up. Isn't that wonderful? But the challenge is then to be faithful in THIS context, in the now; not sugar coating it, not hiding from it, not pretending, "Oh! Isn't it lovely we all believe in Jesus; it's really nice." No, I wish we had picked somebody better to follow quite frankly. You know, he had this very unpleasant middle part. We know it's not the end, but it is awfully like dying; because it is dying. So who knows where this journey takes us; but our God will be faithful.

Impact of Economic Growth on the Poor

So, this afternoon, I want to do a couple of things. The first thing I want to do is to set a context for the electoral piece; and then talk about some of the issues that we are facing in light of people in poverty in light of that context. And then I want to talk a bit about what are we called to as a Church, as a people of God, as this place where God can flame up in our lives. And then, a little bit of ending things; then we'll chat. We'll have questions and comments. Hopefully, everybody saw the agenda; so you know we're all going to have a chance, except the crowd's so large, (Laughter) it's not going to be an intimate conversation; but we'll do our best.



Okay! So to start us off, I need seven bold volunteers; and it's not for a speaking part. The only thing you have to do is be able to walk and count. So could I have seven volunteers? Just line up here please. Come, come don't be shy. (She spends time organizing and preparing the volunteers.) Okay! Behold what we have here is a representative sample of the United States. And economists refer to them as quintiles. It is the esoteric way of saying, "Twenty percent." So you're going to be the top twenty percent for income. And you're going to be the fourth. Welcome to the middle class! It's just fabulous; you're the next to the bottom. And, *Senior*, you're at the bottom. Now what we are going to look at is the change in income between 1979 and 2009, okay? The first thing that you need to know is that between 1949 and 1979, everybody's income went up almost 100%. And the very top - ta-dum - went up 86%; but the very bottom went up 116%. But we also know that a percentage of a big number means a lot more money; so even though it was 86%, it was a lot more money than the 116%. Got it? We all remember our math; I think it's basic. If a train leaves at - no, no don't go there (laughter) - so what we're going to do is create a human bar graph, and for every five percentage of change in the income between 1979 and 2009. For every five percent we're going to ask each one to take a step so we can see visually what it looks like, okay? Okay! Here is our "x axis." So everybody lines up their heels with the line the x axis. We want everybody starting at the same point.

Now I'm very pleased to report, Shaun, that the top 20% income between 1979 and 2009 went up 49.2%. So you, my friend, get to take ten steps forward. Are you ready? (Everyone counts it out each time). I am very pleased to report, Erin, that the 60-80% folks' income grew by 23%. So you get to take four and a half steps forward. Dorothy, here, is our middle class. I am pleased to report the middle class from 1979 - 2009 grew by 11%. So you get to take two steps forward. I am pleased to report, Angela, that your income grew 4%. So you get to take one step forward. So, James, I am so sorry to tell you but your income declined by 7%. So you get to take one and a half steps backward. This is our context of what's happening. But let's add one more, because Shaun up there at the top, only tells a piece of the story. So, Karen, I am very pleased to tell you that the top 5% during this very same period grew by 73%. So you get to take fifteen and a half steps. Well, you can guess what happens to Connie. I am pleased or saddened - I guess it depends on your perspective - to report that between 1979 and 2009, even including the crash, the top 1% income grew by a hundred and seventy percent; (crowd was dismayed) and you get to take thirty four steps. Look at this! Look at this!

The top twenty is one story, the top five then the top one. And it's out of the top one that you get comments about the forty seven percent, because what do they know? They're so far away. And I wrote an article saying, well that the CEO is as dependent on the janitor as the janitor is on the CEO. And I got this very interesting response. They said, "Yes, Simone, you are right; but the CEO never sees the janitor, they think it's an elf." So, what does this make you all think? Let's shout out some stuff, and I will try to repeat it: "disparity, obscenity, imbalance, greed, arrogance, careless, selfish, sinful, entitled." Oh! I am so upset that you are relying on those programs and not being responsible. If you were responsible, like Connie, who just had the gardener or the nanny, the gated community, the chauffeur, the private jet, the limo, the this, the that, the yacht. She makes all the rules.

Herein lies the trouble, because you begin to think, "Well, okay! If between 1949 and 1979 all incomes grew about 100%, it shows that it doesn't have to be this way." So what changed: the rules - the rules, exactly. This exercise is in a program we do out of NETWORK called *Mind the Gap*, because it's the wealth gap that is creating some of the biggest troubles in our society. And there is this fabulous book called *Spirit Level* by Kate Pickett and Richard Wilkinson, which was a study of all the developed nations in our globe; and these two researchers from England tried to see if there was a relationship between quality of life and income disparity. And they found a direct correlation: that where the income disparity is the greatest, the quality of life for a hundred percent is the worst. Now, I don't know what's happening in Singapore, but they are the only ones that exceed the United States for income and wealth disparity. Disturbing, huh? And so then they tracked sixteen other measures, things like health, mental health, drug and alcohol dependence, incarceration rates, infant mortality, educational achievement; and it goes on and on.

And the one that fascinates me the most is trust. Trust is the worst when income disparity is like this, because the top doesn't have a clue as to how hard it is down here. And while we down here may be able to barely see the top, if you have your bifocals adjusted, but the challenge is: nobody trusts the top, right? And the top certainly doesn't trust the bottom; and the NRA goes crazy. Well, the NRA, well, they're sort of out of this world anyway. But you see how that is? So you get gated communities; you get separations; you get fear; you get anxiety; and you get paralyzed. Because what also happens is: they see enough, especially, I think, it's the 20 to 15 percent see enough of this stagnation to be afraid; they are going to lose something. They are going to lose a job; they are going to lose capacity; and once that fear arises And isn't it amazing that Jesus says over and over: "Fear not! Fear not! Fear not!" It's easy for Him to say! It's a challenge.

Now, who do we have in these various categories? Well, down here below \$27,000, we've got minimum wage workers, housekeepers, fast food, child care, day laborers. Then here, \$48,000, you get non-profits, teachers, state employees. Here, \$74,000, you get nurses, professionals, some of the accountant folks. Then, over \$112,000, you get sales, where there are commissions like real estate and IT; some of the tech places are at that level. And then up here, this crowd above \$112,500, you get folks like CEO's, doctors, athletes - the athletes are probably way up there - actors and actresses, all the people our society really values. Humm! Isn't that interesting? And we get teachers down here, right? the next generation.

Then you get things like - I understand you got little propositions on your ballot; Prop 2, I hear is a big one. Well, you know, what's interesting, I was over at Fr. Jerry's (Bechard) parish and we got into a little foo-foo about Prop 2 that was cool. Since I'm political, I thoroughly enjoy it; but what was interesting to me was a worry that unions sometimes aren't the best. You know, there could be some problems in the union. Yeah! Welcome to the human race. But quite frankly, one of the biggest drivers of this disparity is the undermining of unions, is the diminishment of collective bargaining, (applause) and our persistent refusal to raise minimum wage to a living wage; the fact that, down here, James could work for minimum wage and still be below the poverty level for him and his family, is shocking for me. But in 1970, if you worked for minimum wage, you weren't in poverty, and you could support your family. If minimum wage was going to have the same buying power now, as it did then in 1970, it would have to be about \$12.50 an hour, which would bring you up to here to Dorothy.

It's not going to happen politically; so what have we done? In this time we've made a decision to have this safety net, the safety net so James and his family can eat some place. But look at this, because we've made that choice it's like, if you heard my talk at the Democratic National Convention, I talked about Billy and his family that go to St. Benedict's dining room every night for dinner, he and his wife and two boys, because he works for minimum wage, and he doesn't make enough to both keep a roof over their head and food on the table; so they use food stamps for breakfast and lunch, and they go to the dining room for dinner, because, as he told me, growing kids they have to eat three times a day. Parents can hold out. So we've decided to have this charity thing, under the guise of charity; but look at who it is benefiting. It benefits me if I am going to use the services of this company, because they are going to charge me less, a lower price; it benefits the employer, because he's got an employee who's able to work without having his stomach growling all the time, or being too weak, or distracted, worried about his kids. So, while some in the political life want to say, "Just get responsible," the fact is: we are all responsible for this whole thing (applause). Does that make sense? So we've got to see it in the integrated fashion; that it's an employer benefit; it's a consumer benefit; and it just puts food on their table. So we have some work to do.

Mending the Gap

So the four things - after the first of the New Year NETWORK's (www.networklonny.org) going to launch a Mend the Gap, "How do we fix this problem?" In mending the gap there are four things:

1. Is wages and collective bargaining.
2. Is housing. We've got to fix our housing mess. You all in this area know that is a huge problem. We're just talking about income here, but you might be curious to know that on wealth the median - remember wealth is all of your assets minus your debts equal wealth; that's the net that you've got. What we discovered in doing our research was that the median - is where you count up to the mid-point - the median. The median wealth for a white household in the United States in 2009 was \$114,000; that's all the assets, that's retirement plans, investments, houses, cars, anything. The median wealth for Latino households was \$6,300; and for the African American family, was \$5,500 median. You think, "What happened?" One of the big things that happened was the housing crises, housing crunch. One, because historically, white flight has always happened when families of color move into a neighborhood, and everybody flees; so the first families buy in at top dollar, the prices go down, prices crash. Not only do prices crash, school systems crash too, because that's how we fund our school systems; and so folks are left with houses, what we call it now, underwater. But the other piece is, they then have no assets to pass on to their children; and the single greatest way to grow wealth in our country is inheritance. So you get white flight, you get the decline of neighborhoods; and then, the other pieces, disproportionately large groups of communities of color were shuttled into sub-prime mortgages; and it means they were the most adversely impacted by the housing bubble and the housing collapse.
3. Third thing we gotta do is change some of our *lovely* support programs, the safety nets, because, you know, what people have to spend down to zero - to no resources - in order to get any of these programs, for the most part, which means that they can never get a nest egg to get going again. That was the strategy to find the really deserving poor; but the fact is, it keeps people perpetually in poverty. So there is a big movement about developing resources.
4. And finally the last one is tax policy. Duh! One of the big reasons for that movement of Connie - way out the door down there - were the Bush era tax cuts that disproportionally shifted huge amounts of wealth to the top.

So those are the four things we have to do. Stay tuned. Watch NETWORK. We're going to have a whole interesting workshop of Sundays. Invite me back some time. It would be fine (laughter and applause). Oh! Good! Good! Good! All right; thank you so much.

Polarizing Issues

Wasn't this amazing? We had no idea ... wait! We have to wait for Connie to get back up here. Yes, yes, hard work. (We're gonna put her on one of those sedan chairs and let her people carry her in.) But it's this disparity that creates the reality that we don't know each other. We get separated from each other; and then - since we're doing that elephant in the living room - and then, we have a politics and Church that wants to distract us from this truth, so that we spend our lives fighting over whether or not we believe people should be born, as opposed to engaging the reality that, yes, it's about conception to natural death. It's also about the planet. It's about all of our sacred trusts. But, if you can get polarized in a specific fight, then you can turn a blind eye to this reality. And we can be controlled because of fear. Now I have thought for a long time that the Achilles heel of our nation is fear, because fear keeps us separate, keeps us apart, and basically undermines our Constitution, because, you know, our Constitution is based in democracy, and democracy requires people coming together to solve the tough problems of our time. But fear has generated things like the ever endearing Tea Party, speaking of radical acceptance (laughter). Yeah! I'd like to have tea with them; (loud laughter) but fear can make that possible. Fear can make us apprehensive about talking to people in our parishes, in our churches, unless you wear the secret Elephant badge - I understand (laughter) or do you have a secret handshake? You know, like the early Christians, where you drew a fish, you know, in the ground (laughter). You know, you could draw a *little trunk*, you know, and see if they get it.

So, I did have a woman in Hershey, Pennsylvania, who begged me with tears in her eyes, that if she joined our group, could I give her some names of people who it would be okay to talk to. And then she burst into tears. And I just held her. Can you image: in our nation, that we're so polarized, we can't know who we can talk to; it's so painful. And the whole premise of democracy is that we can come together and have knowledgeable conversations to solve the tough problems of our times. It's so much more than whether or not we are born. It's SO MUCH more! So much more than whether or not, I don't know ... what's the latest fight? that we've got ... "My religious liberty is being offended;" or that another millions of dollars for another building. But the fact is that the gospel tells us over and over, "Fear not," because Jesus knew that was the way to community. That's the way to us being together. That's the breakthrough moment. Does that make some sense? But it's also why the one percent is gonna invest a lot of money to keep that from happening - to use fear. I mean, I don't know all the details about your Prop 2, but it sure seems like just putting collective bargaining in the Constitution, so it doesn't get erased, seems like kind of a good idea for 80% that are at this level. Did you notice at how clumped the 80% were? Wonder who's spending the money on the, hmmm, anti-campaign? I have a hunch I know, not naming names and being radically accepting, but at fighting too, because fighting is another piece of it. All right! What a challenge! What a challenge!

So we've got these issues about being born or not being born as a polarizing element. The other one we've got, it's sort of related, is the Affordable Care Act. And I just wanted to take a couple of minutes and talk about that, because, you all know, that's Obama care; and we worked for two years not to call it Obama care; and then, finally Obama decided, "Oh, I like that." (laughter) It would have been a lot easier if he had just figured that out in the beginning, and what they're doing now in DC, I don't know if you've seen 'em, but they have put "Obama cares" with an "s" on the end as being the way. It's kinda of cute. I wish they would have done it two years ago; it would have made my life easier but just saying - it's all about me, you know. (Laughter)

I just want to do a few quick points about the Affordable Care Act, because there's SO MUCH misinformation out there at this time. First of all, the reason NETWORK got named by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith - can you believe it - just amuses me no end. I mean, can they really be nervous about us? Well, we got named twice in the document. We're small print, but we got named in a headline by the U. S. Conference of Catholic Bishops. And the reason we got named in the headlines, and the reason we got named in the *Assessment* is the Bishop's office is really upset, because we beat them in politics for the Affordable Care Act. (Laughter and Applause) As has been said to me more than

once, "The girls played the boys; and the girls won!" (Shouts and Laughter) Kind of fun; but let me tell you, the boys are sore losers; so you have to pay a consequence. (Laughter)

But let me tell you what happened - and it's a little complicated; and I'll try not to be too DC *waukish*; I'll try not to be too beltway - but I think it is really important that you understand the civil politics that's going on, so you can understand the struggle within faith; because it's not a struggle about faith; it's politics. Remember back in the 2008 campaign, everything was "healthcare was broken; we need to fix healthcare." The big fight was over how would we fix healthcare? There was no consensus about the way forward. But both candidates, McCain and Obama, said we're gonna fix healthcare. So then, President Obama gets elected, and gets inaugurated, and he is a constitutional professor - he teaches Con Law at the University in Chicago - and he expected Congress to legislate. And he was the Executive; so they were going to administer. So he did not submit a proposed bill; and it made Congress mad, because they didn't have anything to work with - "You mean we have to write the bill?" "Yah! That's what the Constitution says." He just thought we ought to follow the rules. So he's learned since then that you can't just let them off on their own like that. (laughter)

So what happened was, the House did really good work in 2009; they passed their bill about, as I recall, June, the beginning of July; and we worked really hard at NETWORK to work on affordability issues, because we work for people in poverty. So, we wanted to ensure that there were good supports for low income people for getting Medicaid coverage; that we wanted there to be good competition, so that the middle class of 200-400 percent of poverty could afford insurance. So in these exchanges, the things that are like shopping markets, to go get your individual coverage, we had a mandated public option, like a Medicare option, that would be on the exchange, because we knew Medicare is THE most efficient delivery system of health care, the most effective insurance company in the country, because they only use four to five cents of every dollar for health care. And where some of the "for profits" use 45 cents of every dollar for what they call administrative costs. So there is no way between 4 to 5 cents on the dollar and 45 cents on the dollar can you possibly, I mean, what were you gonna choose? Of course you're gonna choose the more efficient system. So that was supposed to be the control on these out of control "for profit" insurance companies.

So all of the patient's advocates - that's advocates for people in poverty - all of us "folks" lined up on the side of the House bill. Congressman Stupak, who, from your great state of Michigan, who had his heart broken in this process, said that he got his feelings hurt, 'cause, I've forgotten now who took the lead on negotiating the abortion provision, but he got his feelings hurt 'cause he had always provided leadership and nobody went to him to work out the deal; and so the U. S. Conference of Catholic Bishops is very smart; so they played on his hurt, and got him to do an amendment about abortion funding that would have moved the goal post towards the anti-abortion crowd, away from what had been the tacit agreement of a neutral position on the issue of abortion. It wasn't supposed to change either way, because we didn't want that in play, because it would have ruined everything - as it did. So Stupak carries this for the Conference of Catholic Bishops. He gets a group of Republicans and Democrats to come together and pass this amendment. So it is a victory in the view of the U. S. Conference of Catholic Bishops.

Everyone knew it would not pass the Senate. Everyone knew that, including the Bishops' staff. I don't know if the Bishops themselves knew that; we won't ask. (Laughter) But what the Bishop's staff did was say, for the Senate negotiations that are going on in an *interminable slowness*; and I really fault Harry Reid, I don't understand why Harry Reid, even though I radically accept him, I still don't understand why he is still the majority leader; but, anyway, he is. He could have called that debate anytime: Halloween, Thanksgiving, finally he did it at Christmas. The Stupak amendment failed in the Senate, like everybody knew it was going to. The Bishops' staff advised the Bishops to "not negotiate" with the Senate, because their thinking is: if it goes to a conference committee, we'll be in a stronger position with the Stupak language, and no other real option. God Bless Sister Carol Keehan of the Catholic Health Association, who negotiated a really smart deal with Casey and Nelson, two Senators, and got good, strong language and new mechanism, but good strong language that ensured conscience protections, no federal funding of abortion, and that there would be annual audits, once the bill's fully implemented, to ensure that there is no federal funding of abortion.

The Bishops chose to sit it out, because they wanted the Stupak language; so they didn't even come to lobby on this thing. So what happens? You remember, way back in the dark ages of 2010 January? In a special election to fill Senator Kennedy's seat, a Republican gets elected from Massachusetts. As soon as he was elected, those of us that are political, immediately knew there would be no conference committee, that the House bill was dead, that the only way forward for health care reform was to have the House pass this Senate bill. It wasn't the best bill; and you know what happened? Everybody changed sides in an instant, because business that had all been in favor of the Senate bill suddenly thinks, "Oh, we might be able to get away without doing this," you know, "I think we need to start over," they start saying. And then us patient advocates and low income advocates, we know, the House bill's dead' so we all decide, "We think the Senate bill is the best thing we'd ever seen." Everybody changed places; but the Bishops' committee had no place to go. Does that make some sense? So that when the House finally in March passes the Senate bill, the Bishops had not been engaged in the negotiations; and their feelings are hurt. (Laughter) The other piece that happened was: on the Friday before the weekend before the vote - okay! the vote took place on a Sunday - so ten days before that, on Friday, Sister Carol and Catholic Health Association releases a statement saying, "Catholic Health Association supports passage of the Senate bill."

She had been working with Cardinal George, who was then the President of the Bishops Conference; she had created great friendship with his Polish housekeeper, (laughter) and could get things to him around his staff; but she couldn't get him to commit; so she finally knew she had to go public without it; and she basically used the document they had been working on together. I see her statement in DC, "Always do those controversial things: you release it Friday night, after the news cycle, hoping nobody notices." I notice! Well, she emailed it to me; so I notice. So Saturday morning I was in Los Angeles at community meetings; I say, "We stand with you Carol; and we'll stand with you when you get pushed back from Fourth Street" - where the U. S. Conference of Catholic Bishops is. She emails me back, "Oh, I don't think" - she's not very good at predicting - (Laughter) so she says, "Oh Simone, I don't expect the Bishops to say anything; but the staff will have apoplexy." Well, so did the Bishops!

So then, what happens is: I did our own statement that we get up on our own website; and then I go to meditation. Meditation can get you in trouble; and I think what else can we do; and it comes to me, we can do a sign on letter. So this sign on letter, which we do all the time, became what's called "*The Nuns Letter for Supporting the Affordable Care Act*," and that, I've been told, was the tipping point. So we did that letter. I thought if we had 20 signers we could go public. We had 59; and in between our letter and Sister Carol's statement, the Bishops came out opposing the bill. The Bishops persisted, until about two months ago, to insist that there was federal funding for abortion in the health care bill. They've now changed their website after two federal courts, as a matter of law, have said that there is no federal funding of abortion in the Affordable Care Act. They have now changed their website to say "They're afraid that there's federal funding of abortion. (Moans) Anyway, does that make sense?" (Audience answered, "Yes".)

So the fact is: its politics, it's not faith. All of us firmly believe in the dignity of life, all life, not just human life, but all life; and that it is part of our faith. The question is: politics. What are the political consequences of that belief? For me - for me- it is a question of life that Margaret Kisler, a 56 year old woman, died because she didn't have health care. That was wrong! That was immoral! Her sisters came to our friend raiser in Cincinnati, when we were there on the bus, and brought me her picture. And, for me, the fact that Margaret lost her health care, when she lost her job, and couldn't get her colonoscopy, her screenings, even though her family had a high marker, and all this other stuff, for colon cancer, and she died of colon cancer. That's wrong! It's not a faith filled response to deny people health care in the richest nation on earth. Duh!

The other piece that's very worrisome, that we are gonna be working real hard on is: Medicaid expansion. The one piece that the U. S. Supreme Court struck down was the requirement that all Governors expand Medicaid to 133% of poverty. We've got to make sure that happens; otherwise, more Margaret's will die. Margaret would be covered under Medicaid. It is wrong that adults who don't have kids can't get health care. That's wrong! James, who was standing up here, James deserves to have health care. Folks are workin' hard, playing by the rules, and still in poverty. They're not going to get health care through their

employment. It is a *prolife stance* to care for Margaret, all the Margarets. (loud applause). So that's what we're working on. Hope I'm not boring you.

Nuns on the Bus

Okay, so what do we do? One of the fun things has been to re-read *Church in the Modern World*. Once I got over being really mad at their language, all the "mens" and "hes," (laughter) just saying them I had this thought, "Well maybe it just meant the men; (laughter) and we're exempt, (more laughter and clapping) boys for boys, girls for girls. But then, I realized, radical acceptance really is about taking everybody in, and making sure we are all a piece of this.

So I wanted to share a couple more images and a poem or two; well, I'm just rewriting in my head. It took me longer on health care than I planned. Okay, so, I think the challenge that we're facing is really about being the burning bush, to let God flame up in our lives, so that we can be a warm and attracting alternative, where we might get burned. But, you know, as long as we are faithful, we won't be destroyed. That's the magic! That's the magic! The mystery! The engagement of the Spirit!

But the other piece is that I have learned so profoundly on this bus trip: because, you know, when we went out on the bus trip, which was an amazing experience of the Holy Spirit's work alive, alive in a way that was totally surprising; and we just went out to educate the people about the Ryan Budget; and we got educated in the process. I had expected when we went to the low income neighborhoods, like we did here in Detroit, we went to the Literacy Center, run by the Dominicans; and I thought those were going to be the tough places to go; and then I thought that our *friend raisers* in the evening, like what we did at Gesu church, those were going to be the up-lifting times, where we could tell stories, and be together, and kind of have fun.

You know, what it was the exact opposite. At the service sites, I discovered Catholic sisters all across our country create relationship, create community, create beauty, and create a sense of home; and those were the most nourishing places. And then, I discovered at our *friend raisers* in the evenings, middle class folks, folks quite like us, often similar gray haired motif, or should be gray haired motif, (laughter) but what we discovered was a whole bunch of young folks would show up - a whole bunch of young folks. But I discovered there what I came to call the valley of Ezekiel's dry bones, because our people are parched for real spiritual leadership. Our people are parched, dry, weary, beyond belief, and so sad, often so sad; and so I started pondering, "Well, what is it we need to do?" One of the things I discovered that *Nuns on the Bus* was kind of a joyous outburst; and that helped a lot that people could look at our bus and just smile, 'cause how could you not smile when you looked at that bus. It was fabulous! It was so amusing! "Nuns on the Bus?" Give me a break! The work of the Holy Spirit was: that wasn't supposed to be its name. It was suppose to be - we anguished over this, and I finally decided it was suppose to be "*Nuns Drive For Faith, Family and Fairness.*" Isn't that a fabulous name? (laughter) Entirely too long, but it became our tag line. *Nuns on the Bus* was just what we called it. That was our shorthand, until we thought of a real name. But the real name was *Nuns on the Bus*, because it caught the imagination; and it brought joy.



Prophetic Imagination

I just wanted to share with you five characteristics of this community that I think we are hungering for. And Walter Brueggemann in the preface to the second edition of his book, *Prophetic Imagination*, describes in one paragraph the community that nurtures the prophetic imagination; and the more I think about this, the more I think this is what we are called to. For me at first, it describes religious life; but on the bus I realized we all hunger for it. So, I think, that part of the challenge for us was to do five things:

- The first I find amusing, because I usually forget it: to have a long and available memory; (laughter) and the benefit of doing it in community is that it's available to somebody every day. It doesn't have to be to all of us every day. but to have a long and available memory, so that we can remember. Right now, I'm reading a biography called, *The Good Pope*, about John XXIII; and it is lifting my heart and comforting me, so that I get tears in my eyes, 'cause I think that was when I was a young person, and what I thought would happen. So to have a memory, which is comforting; but it's also challenging. It's also knowing we don't need big buildings; we just need relationship, right? So a long and available memory.
- The second one is much tougher for us in the U. S. The second is to touch the pain of the world as real - to touch the pain of the world as real, because you know what happens when you do that? Your heart's broken; you break open your heart, like when I touch Margaret. I carry her in my bible so that I touch that pain of the world every day, so that my heart is open to the deeper truth, so we're open to each other; otherwise, we get fearful, and our hearts become like walnut shells, shriveled up. Touch the pain of the world is real; you don't have to fix it. Often in religious communities, we always have a committee to fix it. It's not happening; we're too old. The fact is the gift of age for us right now as women religious is that we can't fix it, but we can help everybody let it touch their hearts, and everybody's hearts be broken. That's a whole nother story. *Touch the pain of the world* is real.

Have an active experience of hope. Daily, you should do a little exam. What gave you hope today, because, you know, there's nothing like a miserable person. (laughter) Some of my best liberal friends are miserable; and you think, "You're such an attractive ad for a progressive cause." (laughter). I love being miserable. I mean, if you can't answer, "When did you have hope today," how do we not know the gospel alive within us? How do we not be the burning bush? How do we not let God flame up in our lives? Isn't that the most sacred opportunity? How could we have that happen and not be hopeful? The Holy Spirit's alive and well, and making mischief; and so at the office we goof around, we say, "Should we send the Vatican a thank you note?" (much laughter) "or perhaps a gift membership?" (laughter) 'Cause look at it, if the Vatican had never named us, none of this would have ever happened. The Holy Spirit is alive, and well, and making mischief. We just need eyes to see. We are not left orphaned; God has heard the cries, and will not leave us orphans. Okay, an active experience of hope. If you can't answer every day where you found hope, well, you've got work to do. Call and talk to somebody; let them stir it up for you.

- The fourth that Brueggemann says is really a key piece in this crowd, partially this is that time of day, but it's really important, what Brueggemann says: is to have effective discourse across generations, and I add, and cultures. Now, why would that be important? Seems to me that sometimes us older folks - when I was the leader of my community, I'd sometimes eat with our sisters in assisted living, and one of our young sisters would breeze through in a tank top and shorts, it was hot in Los Angeles, and you know the eyeballs would ... (laughter) in our day; and you can get into the "hell in a hand basket" mode, right? or somebody comes up with a new idea ... "We tried that in 1947. (laughter) It didn't work then, and it's not going to work now!" Or we get the dismissive ... "Ugh! Yeah! Right! They think they're gonna make change; huh! We thought that; look what happened." Those kinds of dismissive things undermine us as well as the youthful energy.

We're so blessed at NETWORK, as every year, we have three or four young folks who have recently graduated from college, come and work with us, and their energy is *gift*, and their willingness to try new stuff, and *to stir up a faith perspective* keeps us old folks alive in ways that wouldn't happen otherwise. But we like to think that we can show them a few things about the

contemplative life, about the value of staying faithful, about claiming our Church; and together we can make something new.

So we need an effective discourse across generations and cultures, because culture helps us see the world in a bigger way; and I know you in the Detroit area have a lot of Iraqi's in the area, the Chaldean folks, and I have learned so much gracious hospitality, in a way that I've never had a clue, from the Chaldean's. I mean, it's been a huge learning for me. I am deeply grateful for all I've been taught. Or my Taiwanese sisters. When I was in leadership, and I went to Taiwan, and I was with my sisters, and we were sitting around at a house meeting, and one of the sisters says to the other sister, "Ling Ping, tell Simone about what your psychiatrist said the other day in your therapy session." (laughter) But I discovered that in a communitarian culture, there is no such thing as private therapy. (laughter) Glad I didn't live there when I was doing my therapy, but hey! (Laughter) But it was gift, gift because I learned something new.

- And the final point that he makes is: we need the capacity to sustain long, long term tension with the dominant culture - the capacity to sustain long term tension with the dominant culture - because, my friends, if we are going to be this community that nurtures a prophetic imagination, if we're gonna let ourselves be the place where God flames up in our lives, and we can be a light for those around us, if we're gonna stand up for the Margaret's of the world, and James, and all the folks that get left out, we're not gonna arrive soon. And the fact is, maybe we'll never arrive; but if we can sustain long term tension with the dominant culture, you know what it gives us? It gives us each other. It gives us that sense of community; it gives us that sense of connection; and it gives us the oneness, so we know we are the community we've been waiting for. We are the community that is desperately needed in our society right now. We are the people that our Church needs and right now, because I work in politics, where I say I work there, because where I have a hope of change, is that we are the people of the United States that can form the more perfect union. We have a lot of work to do. We won't arrive; we're always on the road, but together who could ask for better traveling companions?

Thank you. (applause)



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