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Chaplain talks about conflict and his unusual congregation

by Nancy Haught by Religion News Service

PORTLAND, Ore. (RNS) -- After almost a year as chaplain of the U.S. House of Representatives, which *The New York Times* called "one of the most reviled congregations in the country," the Rev. Patrick Conroy was back in Portland, Ore., for a few days to meet with his Jesuit counterparts.

Conroy, 61, was a theology teacher at Jesuit High School here when the opportunity to be House chaplain arose. He was sworn in May 25 as the chamber's 60th chaplain. In a recent interview, he talked about the challenges of his job and issued a challenge of his own to American citizens. His answers have been edited for length and clarity.

Q: Is the House the most reviled congregation in the country?

A: Well, I was a chaplain at San Quentin (prison, California), too -- and I'm not making a comparison there.

But there is not a member of the House of Representatives who didn't make a conscious choice to be a member of the House of Representatives. They knew what they were getting into. I don't feel like I'm in a room full of people with an approval rating of 12 to 15 percent. That's not part of my consciousness at all.

Q: What does it feel like?

A: I am chaplain to a room full of true believers, who are invested in what they stand for and what they are trying to do. A lot of members are quite faith-filled. Some are convicted, and they don't have crises of faith. Others hope they are being faithful. It's fascinating to watch.

Q: How do you advise someone in that situation?

A: Thomas Aquinas tells us to follow our consciences, to be honest with ourselves. If you can't do that, then we have a crisis.

Q: What's it like to be well-schooled in Catholic social teaching as Congress grapples with the budget?

A: There is a strong theology at play: people who believe that taking care of the poor is what churches do, not what government does, that maybe government is overreaching. But my position is to observe -- not to engage in that argument.

I can hear social justice Catholic voices saying that I'm selling out the Gospel by not being that moral voice. But if I were to do that, I would not be in this position.

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I've studied political science and my early ambition was to be in Congress. But I have prayed, do pray for serenity. I can't have an opinion. In order to be chaplain I have to let go of this stuff.

Q: What has the past year taught you about yourself?

A: I've always had a soft spot for underdogs. I never rooted for Notre Dame or Georgetown because they always won. But when I was a campus chaplain, I was drawn to the students who didn't fit the mold. I liked them.

Q: And you've found people like that in the House?

A: I have.

Q: What do you say to Americans who have lost their patience with Congress?

A: Communicate what is important to you to your congressional representative. Even if your (candidate) lost the election, the rep is still representing you.

I pray that all members in Congress will hear the minority voice and that the American people will be prayerfully supportive of Congress and the president, who represent all of us. If we see this as a zero sum battle, it's going to get ugly.

[Nancy Haught writes for The Oregonian in Portland, Ore.]

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