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Lobbyist sister finds celebrity after Democratic convention

Thomas C. Fox | Oct. 9, 2012

Sr. Simone Campbell is on a roll.

Sister of Social Service, attorney, lobbyist, Campbell has emerged in recent months as the nation?s most visible Catholic sister. In the process she has given a public face, perhaps as never before, to an entire generation of highly trained and motivated women religious.

Since 2004, Campbell has been executive director of NETWORK, the Washington-based Catholic social justice lobbying group. A longtime player on the political scene, she knows well how government works and how it does not.

Yet her rich professional background and decades of experience could hardly have prepared her for the spotlight she?s been under during recent months, in which she has become a first-class Catholic celebrity, receiving daily requests for interviews and public appearances. One day she?s sitting across from Bill Moyers; the next she?s clowning with Stephen Colbert.

Her bright, energetic and sometimes offbeat personality adds to her attractiveness. She appears easy on camera and is effective delivering hard facts about subjects many would rather overlook, like widespread poverty in America.

Hardly known a year back outside Catholic circles, she delivered a rousing speech at the Democratic National Convention in early September. By the end of her talk, delegates were on their feet and Campbell received a sustained ovation.

?[Congressman] Paul Ryan claims his budget reflects the principles of our shared Catholic faith,? Campbell said at one point. ?But the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops stated that the Ryan budget failed a basic moral test, because it would harm families living in poverty.

?We agree with our bishops, and that?s why we went on the road: to stand with struggling families and to lift up our Catholic sisters who serve them. Their work to alleviate suffering would be seriously harmed by the Romney-Ryan budget, and that is wrong.?

One Saturday after the convention, working at NETWORK headquarters, she heard her cell phone ring. Glancing at it she read a message: ?Restricted number.? Answering, a male voice said: ?Can you hold for the president of the United States??

For a split second she found herself suspended in disbelief. Then two seconds later she heard a familiar voice on the other end of the line, the voice of Barack Obama, who thanked her for her speech and for talking about poverty before the delegates.

Obama then thanked her for NETWORK?s important work organizing for the marginalized, Campbell recalled

recently. The president went on to say, ?You must be the most popular person in the United States.?

Campbell replied with a chuckle: ?I hope I?m not more popular than you.?

Campbell said the president reminded her of a lesson he had learned as a community organizer in Chicago years back: If you really want to get something done, you ask nuns to do it.

She thanked Obama for the encouragement. Before the president was off the phone, she said, he invited her to the White House ?for a sit-down.? Campbell suggested the visit come sometime after the presidential inauguration in January.

Tracing its roots to the Second Vatican Council, which proclaimed that the preaching of faith and the promotion of justice go hand in hand, NETWORK?s mission is to ?close the gap between rich and poor and to dismantle policies rooted in racism, greed and violence.?

It was on Dec. 17, 1971, that a group of 47 women religious came together at Trinity College in Washington to plan a new organization to work for the implementation of Catholic social teaching in the United States. In early 1972, Carol Coston, an Adrian Dominican sister, set up an office for NETWORK in Washington. Today the group reaches tens of thousands.

Campbell?s own ?15 minutes? of fame date back to April 14 of this year when the Vatican?s Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith released a highly critical assessment of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious, the umbrella organization for 80 percent of U.S. women religious. Rome?s criticism of LCWR included its ?promoting issues of social justice? at the expense of life issues, including contraception, abortion and euthanasia.

The critique cited NETWORK, run by Catholic sisters, for being complicit in LCWR?s alleged infidelity. That was when the phone began ringing inside NETWORK headquarters as national and international media picked up the story.

?Holy moly!? Campbell exclaimed in a recent telephone interview. ?What a mystery she is, this Holy Spirit. I find it very amusing.?

Campbell?s (and the organization?s) visibility grew again after it fashioned a clever ?Nuns on the Bus? nine-state tour this summer. A handful of nuns went city to city speaking out against a Republican Party federal budget proposal, which the women vociferously argued favors wealthy Americans at the expense of poor families. The Ryan budget, the women said, ?rejects church teaching about solidarity, inequality, the choice for the poor, and the common good.?

In taking that position, the nuns echoed an assessment made by the U.S. bishops months earlier, a message that was being buried by their June 21 to July 4 ?Fortnight for Freedom? campaign in support of religious liberty.

If the women were preaching a distinctly anti-Republican Party political message, the bishops were pushing a not so subtle anti-Obama administration agenda. Nuns on the Bus, featuring sisters who were visiting the needy and touching base with organizations supporting those in need, captured much media attention, and more than the Fortnight for Freedom drew.

This was not the first time the two groups, which share faith, values and nearly all sacraments, appeared at loggerheads.

In March 2010, just prior to the historic congressional vote on the Obama-led Patient Protection and Affordable

Care Act, NETWORK released a letter to each member of Congress, calling for support of its passage and signed by organizations and communities representing tens of thousands of Catholic sisters.

The NETWORK letter came just days after another statement in support of the legislation, aimed at bringing health care to some 30 million more poor Americans, by Daughter of Charity Sr. Carol Keehan, president and CEO of the Catholic Health Association.

Together those letters gave protection and a reason to vote for the act to middle-of-the-road legislators comforted by Catholic approval, even while the U.S. bishops had found the very same reform legislation flawed and unsupportable.

While some Catholics found it a matter of maturity that Catholics could agree on principles and matters of faith while disagreeing on political strategies, the U.S. bishops were distinctly not in those ranks. The bishops rebuked the women, saying their actions represented nothing less than breaches of obedience and faith.

The passage of ?Obamacare,? whatever its final impact, has left the appearance of a political rift between clerics and religious. Some have suggested that this rift likely played into the citing of NETWORK in the Vatican doctrinal assessment of LCWR.

Campbell says she has not yet gotten used to her new celebrity role. She says the chord NETWORK has struck is not just about politics. ?I see in this a deep hunger for relationship, a hunger for beauty, a hunger for connection,? she told me. ?A lot of people feel left out spiritually and somehow we have tapped into this hunger.?

She tells the story of being on a commuter train a few weeks back in New York when a ticket collector spotted her, approached her, and asked for prayers. Before she got off he handed her a folded ticket stub for a keepsake. ?Keep it up,? he said to Campbell as the nun stepped from the train. Campbell now carries that stub in her Bible to remember the request.

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