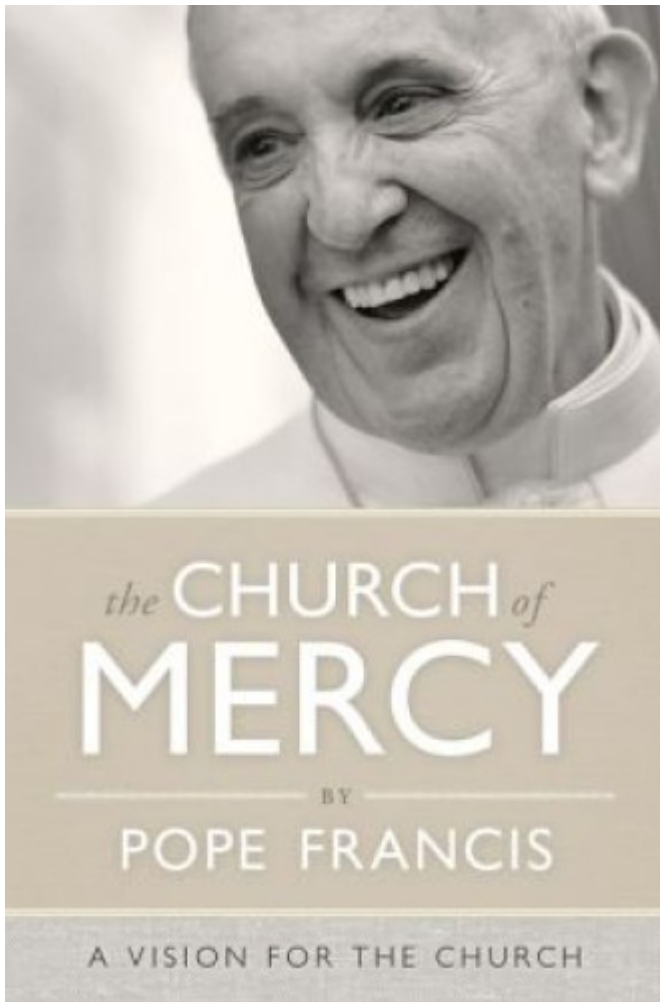


Pope on the bus?

by [LaVonne Neff](#) in the [July 9, 2014](#) issue

In Review



The Church of Mercy

By Pope Francis
Loyola Press



A Nun on the Bus

By Sister Simone Campbell
HarperOne

A couple years ago I attended a large gathering where a Catholic sister, a well-known advocate on behalf of the poor, was present. Coming up behind her, I said, "Sister, you give me hope for the Catholic Church." Without turning around she quipped, "I can tell you are not a bishop."

Exactly two weeks after that event, the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith formally censured the Leadership Conference of Women Religious for, among other alleged offenses, "disagree[ing] with or challeng[ing] positions taken by the Bishops, who are the Church's authentic teachers of faith and morals." The CDF's document stated:

While there has been a great deal of work on the part of LCWR promoting issues of social justice in harmony with the Church's social doctrine, it is silent on the right to life from conception to natural death, a question that is part of the lively public debate about abortion and euthanasia in the United States. Further, issues of crucial importance to the life of Church and society, such as the Church's Biblical view of family life and human sexuality, are not part of the LCWR agenda in a way that promotes Church teaching.

The CDF specifically singled out Network, a social justice lobby based in Washington, D.C., affiliated with the LCWR and headed by Sister Simone Campbell.

Fast-forward two years to April 2014: HarperOne publishes Campbell's memoir, *A Nun on the Bus*, and Loyola Press publishes Pope Francis's *The Church of Mercy*. Interestingly, although Campbell mentions abortion several times (she's against it), Francis, who speaks often and passionately about issues of social justice, says not one word in his warm and readable little book about abortion, euthanasia, or human sexuality.

What the pope does speak about is God's boundless love for all humankind. Assuring Christians that "to become saints only one thing is necessary: to accept the grace that the Father gives us in Jesus Christ," he then challenges those saints to go out into the world and share the love. "The more that you unite yourself to Christ and he becomes the center of your life," he says, "the more he leads you out of yourself, leads you from making yourself the center and opens you to others."

For Francis, following Jesus means renouncing the idols of power, violence, and profit. It means seeing others "not as rivals or statistics, but as brothers and sisters"—not just people in our own demographic, but "especially those who are the most distant, those who are forgotten, those who are most in need of understanding, comfort, and help." This requires going way beyond charity: it means "working to eliminate the structural causes of poverty; . . . it presumes the creation of a new mind-set that thinks in terms of community and the priority of the life of all over the appropriation of goods by a few." In other words, it means a way of life very much like Sister Simone Campbell's.

The 39 short chapters in *The Church of Mercy* are excerpted from [homilies, speeches, and writings](#) from the first eight months of Francis's pontificate. Because the intended audiences vary widely—students, adult laypersons, priests, bishops,

and groups with specific missions and ministries—the book’s style is uneven, but its message is consistent.

Repeatedly Francis refers to the importance of prayer, of listening for the Holy Spirit’s guidance, and of taking one’s faith out of the church building and into the world. “God does not wait for us to go to him, but it is he who moves toward us, without calculation, without quantification,” he reminds a general audience during Holy Week. This is why we in turn must “come out of ourselves in order to go to meet others.” When you do this, he tells a group of young Jesuit students, “you will be happy and will build your life well.” For Francis, a good life results from being empowered by the Holy Spirit to follow Jesus into the world, fostering community and solidarity. Such a life brings hope and joy.

Holy Spirit, community, solidarity, hope, joy—these words also appear frequently in *A Nun on the Bus*. [Campbell](#) has spent 50 of her 69 years with the Sisters of Social Service, a religious order with a dual focus: Spirit-led contemplation and social action on behalf of the poor. For 18 of those years Campbell worked as an attorney for the Law Center for Families in Oakland, California, which she founded shortly after earning her law degree from the University of California at Davis. She has also been a community organizer, the general director of her religious order, and the executive director of Jericho, a public policy organization that addresses poverty issues.

Campbell didn’t attract national media attention, however, until President Obama began reforming American health care. “The justice component of health care has been a core element of Catholic social teaching—and the work of the Catholic Church in the United States—for decades,” she writes; Pope Benedict himself called health care a human right. As momentum gathered for health-care reform, Campbell, by this time executive director of Network, sprang into action: “Our goal was to pass a health-care reform bill of significant scope that would begin to reform the ramshackle, unjust system that had existed for decades and that was growing more untenable and unaffordable every year.”

But abortion quickly derailed the discussion. The Catholic bishops, along with a significant number of legislators and a sizable portion of the American electorate, believed health-care reform would require taxpayers to subsidize abortions. Campbell, who “had read the bill as a lawyer,” disagreed. That the bill passed is partly thanks to Campbell’s lobbying, which included a last-minute letter signed by

59 prominent American nuns. This was not a case of “weighing the needs of those without health care against the needs of the unborn,” she assured a Fox News reporter. “We did not have to choose, because we had both. The unborn were protected *and* those without care would get it.”

While behind the scenes the Vatican began investigating the uppity American nuns, Network turned its attention to poverty issues in light of the budget proposed by Representative Paul Ryan. It’s hard to drum up media interest in poverty, however, and Network was “struggling mightily to figure out how to do that.” A bus tour, the nuns thought, might help. Then in April 2012, the Vatican unwittingly rode to the rescue. “At the very moment we were standing shoulder to shoulder with the bishops in their fight to protect the poor and advance the social justice mission of the Church,” Campbell writes, “the Vatican criticized us for focusing too much on protecting the poor and advancing the social justice mission of the Church.” The media smelled blood and rushed to the scene.

The Nuns on the Bus began their two-week tour in June 2012, talking with people in small-town America about how the Ryan budget would affect their lives. Less than three months later, Campbell was speaking at the Democratic National Convention on the importance of sharing responsibility for the nation’s struggling families. In 2013 the nuns took to the highways again, this time with a three-week bus tour promoting immigration reform. It was also the year that Jorge Mario Bergoglio became Pope Francis.

As these two books show, Francis, who named himself after the gentle saint of Assisi, has a lot in common with Simone, who named herself after the outspoken senior apostle. Both have a driving concern for the poor. Both know how to work the media. Both continually invoke the power of the Holy Spirit.

Nevertheless, the standoff between the Vatican—though not necessarily the pope—and American nuns continues. This spring the CDF again scolded the LCWR, this time for honoring a theologian without going through the mandated preapproval process.

Here is Campbell, quoting Pope Francis:

“The Holy Spirit upsets us because it moves us, it makes us walk, it pushes the Church forward,” Francis said at one of his off-the-cuff homilies at morning Mass a month after his election. We want “to calm down the Holy Spirit,” he added.

“We want to tame it, and this is wrong.”

He’s right. Amen, says this sister to her brother, the pope.

It remains to be seen whether Pope Francis will say amen to his sister Simone.