

Noisy contemplation



by [Nancy Sylvester](#)

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- [Contemplate This](#)



Social Service Sr. Simone Campbell speaking at U.S. Capitol for Nuns on the Bus Sept. 22. (GSR photo / Vinnie Rotondaro)

The swirl that I found myself in when I visited Washington, D.C. during the Pope Francis’ visit to the United States brought to mind Jesuit Fr. Bill Callahan, who in the early 1980s coined the phrase “[noisy contemplation](#).” It was a clear call that we can all pray all the time no matter how hectic our lives become. It is taking the time to really see what is before us, no matter how fast we might be going.

Having planned this trip with a good friend of mine, long before the papal visit was announced I went expecting to visit some of my old stomping grounds when I lived and worked in D.C. I read the pope’s schedule and the various street closings without thinking that they might affect me. However, once arrived, I began to get caught up in the 24-hour news cycle, the inside-the-Beltway buzz, the papal frenzy that kept me going from morning to night with very little alone time. It was a great time to practice “noisy contemplation.”

What did I see as I was going so fast?



Dominican Sr. Carol Coston, at the Martin Luther King, Jr. memorial in Washington, D.C. (Nancy Sylvester)

Never having visited this [memorial](#), we went there the day before the pope arrived. The entrance is a large piece of stone from which a section has been cut. You enter through that space and emerge to stand in awe at Martin Luther King’s likeness chiseled on that cut-out piece of stone. It towers high above you, dwarfing you and all the pettiness, hatred, violence and discrimination that persists in our world. The words on the side convey it powerfully. “Out of the mountain of despair, a stone of hope.” He gazes out upon the Potomac and directly at the [Jefferson Memorial](#) — Thomas Jefferson, one of our founding fathers and a slave owner. The decades, the abuse, the pain and suffering that had to happen before we could celebrate the life of Dr. King provide a perspective. It is one of hope. It can happen. We can see the humanity of the other. We can see the

divinity of the other. Through it all. *The fierce determination of women to keep their families whole*

As the pope was arriving in D.C., so were 100 women who had walked 100 miles urging immigration reform. Immigrants themselves, they told their stories of separation and abuse. One

woman who had bone cancer and was in great pain and unable to walk just a couple of months ago was determined to gain the strength to make this walk, and she did. Although they weren't sure they would see the pope, they wanted their message to be embodied in them for all to see. They make visible the desires and the hopes of those who still see the U.S. as a place of freedom and opportunity. They help us remember that nearly all of us have come from immigrant families.

NETWORK's [Nuns on the Bus](#) had completed another trip to gather the stories of those women, men and children who are lacking the economic necessities to become who they are meant to be. These are stories of people living here who suffer from our unequal distribution of resources and the skewed budget priorities of our nation. We joined with many others to greet those women religious who had joined with the NETWORK staff to travel the 2,000 mile journey. The stops always involve women religious who are in service to those most in need, who have been in the trenches for years — some since NETWORK's beginnings in 1972. Looking around at those gathered I was edified to see many whom I've known for years who continue to work for peace, justice, human rights and sustainability, and many whom I did not know. Young women and men are joining the staff or serving as interns and associates in many of the organizations. The next generation is taking their place alongside of those who know the power of "keep on, keeping on." Fidelity to one's values, one's vision is itself transformative.

The tolerance and patience of the people living, working and gathering in D.C. that week

Washington, D.C., is a town where time is a valuable commodity. Walk into a Metro subway and you begin to pick up your pace. If you have to transfer within the system you stand right where the door opens so you make sure you get on the very next train. Walkers, cyclists, drivers fill the city streets. This week closures were everywhere. Security on high alert. Crowds swarmed to enter the various venues and to just wait and see the pope. I found everyone to be incredibly tolerant of this Catholic leader coming to town and causing slowdowns galore. Smiles, politeness met me in whatever line I was in. There was no resentment about this Catholic phenomenon, rather a willingness to embrace it and be part of this event.

Contemplation opens you up to paradox and ambiguity. It widens your perspective and makes you humble in the face of your own limitations and sinfulness. It frees you to speak courageously without judgement. As I listened, watched and experienced Pope Francis, I felt touched by his energy and his love. His message of mercy and joy flows from such deep conviction and experience. He encounters each one in a spirit of openness able to hold and bless one's suffering and one's joy. He challenges without judgement or righteousness. I hope in his choosing not to directly address the church's positions on women and sexuality he is revealing to us his own blind spot and his willingness to take a long loving look at it in new ways. His presence is his message and it spoke to people — believers and non-believers, Catholics and those of other traditions. His witness spoke to my belief that as we transform our consciousness, the new ways we begin to speak and act are powerful and witness to what is possible.

The faithfulness to love amidst many challenges

While we were in Washington we stayed with two good friends. They are feminist theologians who founded and run a national organization. Their work takes them not only throughout the states but internationally as well. "Noisy contemplation" is not foreign to them. Over 13 years ago they adopted their daughter from an orphanage in China. As she began to develop it became apparent that she had language and learning issues. She would need extra help to learn how to speak and read. Their love for their daughter had and has no bounds. They give of themselves personally and invest financial resources to provide opportunities for their beautiful daughter to fulfill her potential.

It is good to be back home returning to some quiet time, but I am glad the whirlwind of events led me to see more deeply what was happening around me. Let me end with words from Bill Callahan:

To sustain people as loving human beings during the long and arduous work of justice and peacemaking is the dream of noisy contemplation. . . . Experience continues to reinforce the conviction that ordinary people can pray deeply. Jesus prayed throughout a busy, 'activist' ministry. He encourages us to do likewise. Jesus engaged in noisy contemplation and so can we.

- William R. Callahan, *Noisy Contemplation, Deep Prayer for Busy People*; Quixote Center, Bentwood, Md., 2008

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