

Nuns on the Bus protest campaign rolls into Chicago

Group stops at Walsh headquarters to chide representative for vote on House budget

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Tired of being pushed to the proverbial back of the bus by Roman Catholic leaders, a group of American nuns rolled into Chicago on its own set of wheels Wednesday to protest proposed federal budget cuts and spotlight the work their sisters do to help the nation's poor.

The Nuns on the Bus stopped at Republican U.S. Rep. Joe Walsh's Fox Lake headquarters to scold Walsh for voting on a House budget that the sisters say threatens to hurt the people they serve.

On Thursday the nuns will stop at Mercy Housing Lakefront in the Englewood neighborhood, a low-income housing development for the homeless sponsored by nine women's religious orders.

Network, a Roman Catholic lobby based in Washington, unveiled its road map shortly after the Vatican scolded America's women's religious communities for not placing enough emphasis on church teachings on abortion and the questions surrounding euthanasia.

The tour's second day in Chicago coincides with the start of the Catholic bishops' Fortnight for Freedom, a campaign to promote religious liberty. But organizers said that was not intentional.

"This is about the (Capitol) Hill schedule, not church schedule," said Sister Simone Campbell, executive director of Network, National Catholic Social Justice Lobby. "We're standing with our bishops and saying the budget is an amoral document. ... We're on the same page on this one."

Cheering, clapping and clamoring for photographs, fans have greeted the sisters at almost every campaign stop in Iowa, Wisconsin and Illinois since their bus tour began its nine-state, 2,700-mile pilgrimage toward Washington.

"It's good energy," said Sister Joan McGlinchey, vicar of the Archdiocese of Chicago's Office for Religious. "If I had the time myself, I'd get on the bus with them."

But the nuns also have encountered less-than-warm welcomes. In Iowa, U.S. Rep. Steve King's offices were locked when the nuns showed up for a scheduled appointment.

On Wednesday, about 100 supporters cheered and held signs as the four nuns stepped off the bus in Fox Lake, where Walsh's staff had been instructed by their boss to treat the sisters with respect.

"As an Irish Catholic boy, I always genuflect at a nun," Walsh said.

The nuns' trip was inspired by Rep. Paul Ryan, R-Wis., who said Catholic social teachings inspired the cutbacks he proposed in the House budget. His explanation sparked outrage from Catholic bishops and theologians who insist Ryan misinterpreted those teachings. The church teaches personal responsibility with an awareness of the larger



Sister Mary Wendlen waves to supporters Wednesday in Fox Lake, where she and three other nuns visited the headquarters of Republican U.S. Rep. Joe Walsh, to scold Walsh for voting on a House budget the sisters say threatens to hurt the people they serve. (Stacey Wescott, Chicago Tribune)

community, especially when the community is hurting, theologians say.

"We just think they didn't have enough information," Campbell said. "They didn't know the fullness of Catholic social teaching. They're not bad people. It's just that they made a vote that will hurt people."

But Walsh said he agrees with and shares Ryan's interpretation.

"My Catholic teaching tells me that it's my responsibility to take care of my fellow man," he said. "That's not the government's responsibility. It's mine. ... Oftentimes, the Catholic Church can be misguided on economy and government."

Sister Joellen McCarthy, who works for the 8th Day Center for Justice, helped plan the nuns' itinerary in the Chicago area, including a fundraiser Wednesday night at Grace Place, an Episcopal parish in the South Loop.

The cutbacks in the House budget would decimate many programs run by sisters, such as Mercy Homes, McCarthy said.