

## READING AND DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR

# *A Nun on the Bus*

by

Sister Simone Campbell

*Thank you for reading my story. I hope you will take this next step. Use the questions to reflect on how you came to your own values and how you live them in your community and our democracy. I'd love to hear about what hope, change, or community action my book stirs up in your life. Share your thoughts with me at [www.networklobby.org/ANunOnTheBus](http://www.networklobby.org/ANunOnTheBus), and together we can celebrate this vibrant opportunity to be "We the People." This could be another way to come together. For me, I see it as the work of the mischievous Holy Spirit!*

—Sister Simone Campbell

### COME, HOLY SPIRIT

1. Sister Simone writes that she reflects daily on what she is being called to and how she can respond to that call (p. xiv). How can we open ourselves up daily to hearing

and heeding these calls in our own lives? What would this require in your life?

2. “It is living on the edge of the gospel that is so alluring to my spirit” (p. xiv), writes Sister Simone. In response to the pope’s call to “be sent to the frontiers of the world, avoiding the temptation to domesticate them,” in what ways have you lived on the edge of the gospel? In what ways are you being called to do so in the future?
3. Sister Simone describes her life, the contemplative life, as a life lived in the present moment, one in which she is called “to sit openhanded to receive all that comes,” “treasuring but not grasping” (p. xv). What would it mean in your life to live openhanded? What are the things you grasp rather than treasure? In what ways might your attachment to those things be holding you back?
4. What might it mean for “Come, Holy Spirit” to be the anchor of your life (p. xvi)? Why might living this way sometimes feel scary?
5. Sister Simone refers to the sisters and staff of NETWORK’s Nuns on the Bus tours and NETWORK as “manna.” In what way were they manna? What does it mean to be manna for one another? How are you manna for others (p. xx)?

## CALIFORNIA CATHOLIC

1. Sister Simone recalls feeling changed when she made her First Communion, as if she had been freed of something. Have you had a similar experience within the church or at the beginning of a spiritual journey? Do you have an early memory of encountering the holy or a calling before you understood it?
2. Community is a central theme for Sister Simone. She believed strongly, even as a child, that “everyone had a part” (p. 7). How is that perspective played out in your local neighborhood, church, or parish? What do you see as your part?
3. When Cardinal McIntyre reprimanded the Immaculate Heart sisters for not wearing their habits, Sister Simone describes his mistake as confusing “the forms of our religious life with the essence of our religious life” (p. 8). What are some other ways in which we might confuse form with essence when it comes to religious life?
4. The Immaculate Heart sisters and their Vatican II–inspired commitment to the Holy Spirit and social justice had a great impact on Sister Simone. Looking back, who were the people or circumstances in your life that awakened in you an awareness of social justice issues?

## THE QUASI NUNS

1. The course of Sister Simone's life was changed by her sister's fatal illness, the timing of which coincided with Simone's growing awareness of and commitment to civil rights. The congruence of the two only heightened her sense of "the call to work for justice while we have breath in our bodies" (p. 13). For some, of course, such a coincidence might have convinced them of the opposite—that it was hopeless, that our efforts did not matter. Why do you think Sister Simone was instead able to channel an awareness of our mortality into the determination to make a difference? How can we create or encourage such a determination in ourselves? In our children? In our neighborhoods or communities?
2. Although people often caution her against burnout, the author writes, "I have always felt that I have the energy and stamina for the long haul, and such cautions have seemed superfluous. I press on, always have" (p. 13). Does this description fit you? Are you more driven or more cautious? Is it important to have people working for social justice who express both sides of the spectrum? Why or why not?
3. "Jesus for me has always been about justice," (p. 15) writes Sister Simone. Do you agree? Why or why not?
4. As she was preparing to take her final vows as a Sister of Social Service, Sister Simone channeled her drive for social justice into working with troubled teens and household workers and lobbying, among other things.

What are some ways you have helped others? How have those experiences shaped you? Looking back, did anyone help you in this way? If so, how? What impact did their work have on your life?

### TOUCHING THE PAIN OF THE WORLD

1. Reflecting on her experiences representing poor families at the Community Law Center, Sister Simone writes, “Being with real people and dealing with real issues is sacred” (p. 36). How do you interpret this statement? Why is it so essential that we move past studying and hoping and even praying for a better world and go out to be with the people who are aching or struggling?
2. Working with clients at the law center “by touching their pain and trying to ease it,” though difficult, was spiritually nourishing for Sister Simone (pp. 39–40). What is it about confronting and trying to alleviate another’s pain that can bring spiritual benefit? How have you experienced this?
3. Sister Simone describes realizing she was low on spiritual nourishment when the sound of a straw pulling at the very bottom of a soda popped into her mind. Have you ever reached a similar point of spiritual depletion? If so, what did you do about it?
4. Smarting from the criticism she received from some of the other sisters of the community she was now leading, “my spiritual meditation practice became sitting

with the criticism that hurt me until I knew the truth of it. Once I knew the truth, it released the barb of it and I could grow and not be angry about it” (p. 41). Have you ever considered doing something similar with criticism that hurts you? How is it that understanding the truth of something can lessen its hurt?

5. Meditation and poetry both became avenues for Sister Simone to explore spirituality. She describes Zen practices as “a way to do what my heart desired” (p. 44). What practices outside a traditional service have enhanced your own spiritual journey? Has either meditation or poetry been a spiritual path for you? If so, how? What are your most fruitful spiritual practices?

### WALKING WILLING: IRAQ TO WASHINGTON

1. Sister Simone was initially reluctant to go to Iraq at a dangerous and uncertain time. When have you been presented with an opportunity that made you pause? What does it mean to be “walking willing” (p. 54)?
2. Did reading about the situation Sister Simone discovered in Iraq change or expand your opinion of American actions there? If so, how? Is there such a thing as a just war? Explain.
3. “My belief, reinforced by my meditation the previous month, was that we needed to create connections that lead to community and sharing a meal is the best way to do that” (p. 70). How does sharing a meal create

connections? When has it helped you do so? Whom could you invite to your home to share a meal?

4. Sister Simone believes that if politicians could come face-to-face with the hardworking people for whom she lobbies, they would change just as she has. Do you agree? What stories would you like to share with your congressperson? What stops you from sharing them?

### HEALTH-CARE REFORM: DIVIDED, NOT CONQUERED

1. What do you think about the health-care facts Sister Simone lists at the beginning of the chapter? Do any of them surprise you? Anger you? Explain.
2. “Health-care reform was also consistent with our constant reference to the social teaching of the Catholic Church to guide our mission. This body of work stresses the dignity of each individual and the view that human beings are social creatures. Because of that, we are bound to one another and cannot live solitary lives in isolation. Rather, we live in solidarity with each other. Repeatedly, popes have stressed the shared responsibility of all to create the common good with a special concern for those people who live in poverty” (p. 79). Do we have a moral imperative to make sure everyone in our country has health care? Why or why not?
3. As Sister Simone points out, issues such as health-care reform and abortion often create very strong feelings. Sister Simone admits that when she meets someone

who has an adamant position, she is often tempted to take the opposite one to balance it out. So, she writes, “It is my spiritual practice to try to remember . . . that all of this Gospel life is based in love. I try to open my heart to all people and not get caught in the quagmire of thinking that my insights are better, more right” (p. 80). How do you tend to react when someone strongly disagrees with you on a social issue such as these? How do you think you *should* react?

4. Sister Simone writes of how, when she looks outside herself in response to need, she has plenty of energy for “living yes” (p. 81). When has focusing on the needs of other people energized and focused you—physically or spiritually?
5. In the end, it was a simple letter that Sister Simone and her organization wrote that made such a difference in the passing of the health-care reform bill. President Obama himself told her that the letter had been the tipping point. What issue can you write a passionate letter about—to your city council, to your representative, to your senator?

## THE VATICAN VERSUS THE NUNS

1. Sister Simone points out the irony of the fact that we think of the United States as the richest nation on earth when 20 percent of the population is living on \$20,000 a year, and 23.5 million children live with parents who are low-income workers. Why is a just wage essential to



a worker's dignity? Why are so many of us blind to these inequalities in income?

2. Sister Simone expresses concern that the church's mission has become competitive rather than complementary, with a fixation on narrower pro-life issues to the detriment of the whole spectrum of social justice. Are there other issues you feel have been championed to the detriment of others? What are some solutions to this lack of balance?
3. Sister Simone writes, "My hunch is that [the bishops] are focused on false dichotomies: fear versus joy; exclusion versus inclusion; rules versus the gospel story. The second option in all of those—joy, inclusion, Gospel—will win every time" (p. 112). How have you seen the truth of her words?

## ROAD TRIP

1. The impetus for the road trip came from Sister Simone's realization that she needed to ask for outside help. What biblical story does she reference to support her realization? Why might asking for help have been difficult for her?
2. She had feared that all the visits to the places where her fellow sisters worked would be challenging because of the suffering of the low-income people they served, but she found instead that those places were places of relationship and solidarity. "If the bus trip did nothing else, it was a powerful reminder of how much others give us,

and teach us, when we think we are doing something for them” (p. 139). How can simply forming relationships lead to hope?

3. Sister Simone was so touched by the story of Brittany, the young woman who had been homeless for two weeks until her first semester of college started, that she asked for her signature and carried her name with her in her Bible. Who has carried you in his or her heart this way? Who do you carry in your heart?

### SPEAK, AND FEAR NOT

1. In her speech at the Democratic National Convention, Sister Simone spoke for those people she had met on her trip, people whose voices would not otherwise have been heard. What are some of the voices in your community that may need your help to be heard?
2. Sister Simone’s advice to the young Obama staffers as they transitioned from election people to policy people included a reminder that political success is always across some middle ground. Has this been your experience? What are some ways we can begin to find middle ground with those who are on the opposite side of an issue?

## NUNS ON THE BORDER

1. “But what I have learned is that if I am holding on too tightly to even the good things of my life, I have no room for the new” (pp. 160–161). Do you have trouble remaining open to the new? If so, what might be holding you back?
2. Sister Simone believes one of the main reasons we need immigration reform is because of our country’s history of slavery—that we can never again allow the creation of “a permanent underclass of second-rank residents” (p. 173). Have you ever thought of immigration reform as being linked to the history of slavery? Do you find this argument persuasive? Why or why not?
3. The bus trips connected national policy, which can often seem abstract, to real stories of people who were struggling. For example, if it weren’t for the second trip, Sister Simone and her fellow bus riders might never have learned about the social security widows who, despite increasing age and frailty, must travel to the United States for one month each year to receive social security benefits after their American husbands’ deaths. What are some ways in which you can hear the stories of those in your own community whose suffering might otherwise go unnoticed?

## THE ROAD AHEAD

1. Many of those who are passionate about helping others, as Sister Simone is, struggle with balancing the doing, active part of activism with the listening, passive part in which we ask for guidance and clarity. Which comes more easily to you? How can you create space for more listening or more doing, whichever is more difficult for you?
2. Sister Simone suggests that perhaps our political focus should be on a commitment to “civil obligations as a balance to the focus on civil rights” (p. 180). Do you do a good job of fulfilling your civil obligations? Why or why not? How can you inspire others to get involved?
3. Many political issues are mentioned here: the war in Iraq, minimum wage, health care, abortion, immigration reform. What are the issues that most inspire you to try to make a difference? What are some concrete ways in which you can work for justice?