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Budget should reflect Catholic sense of common good

Lisa Sowell Cahill | Apr. 23, 2009

As Congress works to strike a deal on President Obama?s federal budget proposal, let?s take a time out from the partisan spin and cable news punditry.

The budget debate should not be about abstract economic theories or tired ideological battles. It?s about choosing our priorities as a country and restoring belief in government that serves the common good.

Catholic Charities USA and other faith-based advocates for the poor have praised President Obama?s budget for a reason. It represents a fundamental shift away from decades of policies that made life easier for elite corporate executives and much harder for the poor and working class. It also recognizes that blind faith in the free- market is a fallacy built on quicksand.

This isn?t the specter of socialism. This is about stitching together fraying social safety nets that protect the most vulnerable and making sure the economy works for all Americans. By making critical investments in decaying public infrastructure, healthcare, education and other essential programs that impact the dignity of the human person, President Obama?s budget affirms many essential Catholic values in the public square.

As Catholics, we have an essential role to play in spreading the message that our financial crisis is also a moral crisis. Catholic social teaching has a long history of warning about the dangers of putting profit before human dignity, and the need to ensure that the economy works for people, not the other way around.

Amid another global economic collapse in 1931, Pope Pius XI affirmed a positive role for government in protecting workers and condemned the growing gap between rich and poor. Franklin D. Roosevelt drew heavily from Catholic social thought in shaping his New Deal agenda.

The Episcopalian president was deeply influenced by Monsignor John Ryan, a populist Catholic priest from Minnesota whom the U.S. Catholic bishops tapped in 1919 to write their Program of Social Reconstruction, which called for living wages, public housing for workers and labor participation in management decisions.

In his World Day of Peace message last January, Fighting Poverty to Build Peace, Pope Benedict XVI called for a new economic model built on the principles of solidarity and human dignity. He pointed to ?immense military expenditure,? the pandemic of AIDS, the global food crisis and financial systems rigged to help rich nations at the expense of the developing world as barriers to justice.

Benedict called for a good dose of righteous anger. Effective means to redress the marginalization of the world?s poor, the pope insisted, will only arise if people ?feel personally outraged by the injustices in the world and by the concomitant violations of human rights.?

Let?s hope Republicans and Democrats put the common good, compassion and economic justice for all before the failed politics of the past.

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