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Catholic bishops and the California crisis

Joe Ferullo | Jun. 17, 2009 NCR Today

California faces a looming budget deficit somewhere in the $20 billion to $25 billion range (the exact figures seems to change every day), but Democrats and Republicans can only seem to agree on one way out of the mess: drastic cuts in programs to help the poor, the infirm, and children.

It's an ugly stalemate and odd in Sacramento, a debate that only seems to be about just how terrible tears in the social fabric should be: Republicans and Governor Schwarzenegger insist they want all-cuts to close the gap, not a penny in new taxes. Democrats are pushing for some new taxes and fee hikes -- but even that would still require heavy cuts that would fall mostly on the disadvantaged.

In this quagmire now steps the California Catholic Bishops Conference. As columnist Tim Rutten writes in Wednesday's *Los Angeles Times*, the bishops last week called for both sides to give top priority to the needs of children, the poor, and disabled [1].

In their statement, the bishops recognize California's crisis is deep and complex -- but, they add that solutions should not focus [2]first and foremost on "wholesale elimination" of programs that address the basic survival of the state's most vulnerable.

The bishops bring a much-needed different perspective to the debate. Up until now, any complaints about budget reductions hitting unfairly on the disadvantaged have been met with one simple retort: that's where the money is! The state doesn't have a lot of programs for the wealthy and the middle class!

Well, the bishops point out, the state does indeed have those programs: they are called tax loopholes and generous tax give-aways, along with an overall tax structure so maddeningly complex that no one really knows how much money is supposed to come in to Sacramento's coffers. How about we start untangling all of that, the bishops ask, before we cut off the lifelines of those who can least afford it?

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[1] http://www.latimes.com/news/opinion/commentary/la-oe-rutten17-2009jun17,0,6351435.column
[2] http://cacatholic.org/index.php/news-and-analysis/budget/422-statement-of-the-bishops-on-the-california-budget-crisis.html