

## Catholic activists to Congress: Don't put deficit on backs of poor

Jerry Filteau | Feb. 16, 2011



Stephen Colecchi speaks during a conference at The Catholic University of America in Washington on March 19, 2009. (CNS photo/Bob Roller)

**WASHINGTON** -- When 300 leaders in Catholic social ministry went to Capitol Hill Feb. 15, their basic message to Congress was simple and direct: It is just plain immoral to put the heaviest burden of U.S. deficit reduction on the backs of the poor.

And they had fact sheets to show that is exactly what legislators are currently proposing.

While a Republican-proposed House of Representatives continuing resolution to keep the government running in the current fiscal year cuts federal spending only 2.6 percent overall, it makes over 26 percent in cuts for poverty-focused international assistance -- 10 times the rate of cutbacks in general spending -- said a Feb. 14 joint letter from Catholic Relief Services and the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops that the social ministry leaders brought to their meetings with members of Congress.

In the resolution's proposed cuts in domestic spending, federal programs for poor women and children, the unemployed, and other members of the nation's most poor and vulnerable populations face far more draconian cuts than other programs, participants were told.

The Catholic social justice leaders were in town Feb. 13-16 for the 2011 Catholic Social Ministry Gathering, an annual affair co-sponsored by more than a dozen national Catholic organizations engaged in social ministry, including several offices of the bishops' conference.

One of the major features of the national gathering is its third-day focus on lobbying on the Hill.

After two days of preparation that include major addresses and numerous workshops on Catholic social teaching and its application to current social issues in the United States and abroad -- including strategy sessions on how to address key priorities in upcoming legislation before Congress -- participants head off en masse to the Hill, splitting up there for pre-arranged meetings with senators and representatives from their respective home states.

In this year's meetings, participants were urged to focus on three immediate priorities in bills due to come to a

vote soon:

- No excessive burdens to the nation's and world's most poor and vulnerable in the House continuing resolution -- an omnibus appropriations bill drawn up by its new Republican majority that must be passed by mid-March to prevent a total federal government shutdown.
- The "Protect Life Act," H.R. 358, which would amend last year's health care reform act to assure that the longstanding Hyde Amendment to Medicaid and other federally funded health care programs -- prohibiting federal funding of abortions except in cases of rape, incest and danger to the life of the mother -- is also explicitly established in the entire range of the new health care and health care insurance programs created under last year's massive health care reform legislation.
- A reversal of cuts in programs for the poor and vulnerable in the Obama administration's proposed budget for fiscal year 2012, the government fiscal year that starts this October and ends at that time next year.

"It's one thing to share the sacrifice," Stephen Colecchi, director of the bishops' office of international justice and peace, told the gathering's participants Feb. 14.

But in Catholic teaching the poor and vulnerable "have a special place" in society's obligations, he said.

"It is morally unacceptable," he said, to try to balance "the nation's budget on the backs of the poor," at home or abroad.

Bill O'Keefe, senior director for advocacy for Catholic Relief Services, the leading U.S. Catholic overseas aid agency, said "they're cutting money to the poorest people in the poorest countries."

"We know there's a budget problem," he said, but "you can't fix it this way (by slashing U.S. contributions to major health and survival programs in the world's poorest nations). It's not right."

The fact sheet noted that the House Republicans' proposed continuing appropriations resolution for the rest of fiscal year 2011 would slash funding for international disaster assistance and food for education by more than 50 percent, cut food for peace by more than 40 percent, and cut a variety of other programs aimed especially at the world's poorest nations -- for an overall cut of 26.7 percent on U.S. programs that most directly target poverty in those countries.

It contrasted those cuts with the overall budget reduction of only 2.6 percent to highlight that the thrust of the proposed congressional cuts is taking place on the backs of some of the world's poorest people.

Colecchi highlighted the human magnitude of the issue when he noted that the Republican congressional proposal for the rest of fiscal year 2011 seeks to cut \$654 million, almost 12 percent, from global health and child survival funding, which includes President Bush's initiative to provide antiretroviral drugs to children with AIDS.

If that cut goes through, he said, 12 out of every hundred children in Africa and Asia who are currently receiving antiretroviral drugs to stave off the fatal effects of AIDS will die.

On domestic issues involving Catholic social teaching, Catholic Social Ministry Gathering participants were told that, apart from basic issues in Obama's fiscal 2012 proposals, not much guidance could be provided; the House's continuing resolution was too new and complex to provide immediate guidance on how Catholic social teaching should be evaluated or applied.

In the domestic budget, cuts in aid for poor and struggling families are spread throughout the budget, said Kathy Saile, director of the bishops' domestic justice and social development department.

In the midst of a major housing crisis across the nation we cannot afford to cut \$1.3 billion from housing, she said.

John Carr, the bishops' conference's secretary for social development and world peace, asked the gathered social justice ministers to press hard for passage of H.R. 358, which explicitly bars federal funding for elective abortion and would correct the major flaw that kept the U.S. bishops from backing the health care reform legislation passed by Congress last year.

The bishops, who support universal health care, would have backed last year's legislation if it had included measures to insure the status quo in other federal programs banning the use of taxpayer money to fund elective abortions, Carr said.

Of those who opposed the legislation in its final form last year, he said, the bishops and other Catholic leaders are practically the only ones who are saying: "Mend it, don't end it."

[Jerry Filteau is *NCR* Washington correspondent.]

*NCR* is covering the annual Catholic Social Ministry Gathering in Washington this week. For short updates throughout the day, be sure to check out Michael Sean Winters' blog [Distinctly Catholic](#) [1]. For more lengthy reports, see our continuing story coverage:

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