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Entitlement Reform & the Common Good

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Distinctly Catholic

Yesterday, I wrote about Congressman Paul Ryan's indictment of President Obama's budget for its failure to take on the subject of entitlement reform, an indictment that is somewhat deserved but not entirely. As I wrote, I think, or at least hope, the President is laying the groundwork for a large debate in the 2012 elections about how we approach this admittedly complicated issue.

That issue and its complications have gotten inside my skin, and so today I begin a short series of pieces on entitlement reform and how the voice of the Catholic Church can and should shape that debate.

It is good to remember that one of our own, indeed one of our best, Msgr. John A. Ryan, played a critical role not only in shaping the welfare state in America but in defending it politically. As early as the 1919 statement of the Catholic bishops on social reconstruction after World War I, a statement that Ryan wrote, the Catholic Church has stood, almost unanimously, for such measures as Social Security, ending child labor, unemployment insurance and other provisions of the welfare state. Ryan was especially close to Secretary of Labor Frances Perkins who had only accepted her job on the condition that President Franklin Roosevelt would support Social Security. Roosevelt, however, was a canny politician and an exquisite reader of public opinion. (This in a time before there were polls!) He knew that the country was not ready to embrace such proposals and so he told Perkins that she must first set about educating the citizenry and the Congress on the necessity of these measures. Social Security was not a part of Roosevelt's storied First 100 Days. It came two years later, after Perkins, with a great deal of assistance from Ryan, had indeed educated the nation about these proposals.

Catholic social teaching has at its heart several key principles, but the one which most shaped the enactment of Social Security was the principle of the Common Good, the idea that we are all in this together and that our public policies should reflect the aspirations of all for a decent life, not the goals of

the few and monied interests that had brought the country to ruin in their reckless pursuit of profit in the previous laissez-faire structures of the 1920s. Social Security is not just a program of wealth redistribution. It is an expression of our common responsibilities to each other as Americans. It is imperative that we reclaim that expression as the debate over entitlement reform takes shape.

I am exceedingly nervous. I see in this morning's Washington Post that the so-called "Gang of Six" in the U.S. Senate "Senators Kent Conrad, Richard Durbin, Tom Coburn, Mike Crapo, Saxby Chambliss and Mark Warner" are trying to preserve some of the recommendations put forward by the President's blue ribbon panel on deficit reduction. I do not know any of those men personally, but I know that none of them work on their feet for a living, none have supported their families by working in a mine or waiting tables at a restaurant or pouring concrete at a construction site. To the Gang of Six, raising the retirement age is an abstraction, a budgetary figure, a cost-saving device. For someone who has worked on their feet all their lives, raising the retirement age is cruel.

I am shocked that there is any debate about how to lower taxes at the same time as there is talk about raising the retirement age. If the Democrats do not reclaim their mantle as the defender of the working class, they will deserve to lose every election until they reclaim their soul. The soul of the Democratic Party was most clearly and concisely stated long ago, by Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. in his work "The Age of Jackson." Regular readers will recall I have referred to this book before. Here is the key passage: "American democracy has come to accept the struggle among competing groups for the control of the state as a positive virtue" indeed, as the only foundation for liberty. The business community has been ordinarily the most powerful of these groups, and liberalism in America has been ordinarily the movement on the part of the other sections of society to restrain the power of the business community." That was the charter of the Democratic Party in 1946 when Schlesinger wrote those words and it must remain the charter of the Democratic Party today.

The intellectual and moral language of the Common Good is the best, arguably the only, available language with which to confront any entitlement reform proposals that will break the promises the nation has made to its citizenry. Social Security and medicare stand for the proposition that after a lifetime of work, a lifetime of contributing to the health of our society, no one should have to face poverty in their twilight years. A society that establishes such moral guarantees is a more humane society, one more capable of flourishing as well, economically and in other ways. That flourishing will always help the wealthy as much as anyone else and those wealthy should be expected to contribute to it. Social Security is a phrase with a meaning. It is about the security of our society. If the wealthy are not willing to pay for that security, they endanger the society that has rewarded them.

Democrats should take a page from Msgr. Ryan whose efforts earned him the sobriquet "Right Reverend New Dealer," hurled first as an epithet but embraced by Ryan as a compliment. The Common Good demands that we defend Social Security and other entitlement programs and, instead of breaking the promises they embody, look for ways to pay for them that do not bankrupt the country. The programs can be tweaked. The promises should not be broken.

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