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The moral measure of the US budget

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U.S. President Barack Obama, center, meets with congressional leaders on deficit reduction July 14 at the White House in Washington. (CNS/Reuters)

An NCR Editorial

President Obama and congressional leaders are still negotiating the federal budget for next year. The difficulty of these negotiations is heightened by the need to raise the federal debt ceiling, avoiding a government default and the consequent economic nightmare that such a default would entail. Unfortunately, it appears that the nation?s political compass has veered so far to the right that any resolution is likely to harm the poor and assault the already strained sense of national community that we Catholics call the common good.

To his credit, Obama has understood, perhaps too well, that politics is the art of compromise. He has offered to cut important social programs Democrats champion. He even offered to look at reforming Social Security. Both are truly bad ideas. Cutting government programs during a recession, when they are most needed, will harm those who depend upon them for housing, education and nutrition assistance.

Contemplating deep cuts in social programs is particularly unconscionable as the country continues to fund two open-ended wars and approves a military budget, against almost no resistance, of $680 billion.

The U.S. bishops have been clear in pointing out that the draconian cuts being promoted are not merely budget abstractions. They will have real impact on real lives. Cutting college loans means students will have their dreams deferred, their earning potential curtailed, and they will be forced into an already anemic employment market. That isn?t an intelligent way to deal with the deficit. Cutting environmental funding and putting long-term health at risk for short-term financial gain is shortsighted. Decreasing nutrition assistance to poor women by cutting WIC (Women, Infants and Children) places lives at risk, and that is not only an affront to social justice, it is a betrayal of the pro-life cause so many of the budget-cutters claim to champion.

?Some current proposals call for substantial reductions, particularly in those programs that serve the poorest and most vulnerable people in our nation,? Bishop Stephen Blaire of Stockton, Calif., wrote to members of Congress last month. ?In a time of economic crisis, poor and vulnerable people are in greater need of assistance, not less.?

Blaire, who is chairman of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops? Committee on Domestic Justice and Human Development, explained the moral framework that should guide Congress: ?Meeting essential human needs is a compelling ethical and fiscal priority. A moral measure of the budget is how it treats ?the least of these? at all stages of life.?

Speaker of the House John Boehner, a Catholic from Ohio, has gotten spanked every time he has dared to depart one iota from the GOP orthodoxy that insists that the budget be balanced without asking the wealthy to do their part. It is current Republican heresy to suggest the logical step of ending the excessive tax breaks the wealthy received during the Bush years. Advocates of retaining tax breaks for the richest among us repeat, ad nauseum, the myth that raising taxes will cause more unemployment. If this were true, you would think the compromise in December that extended the Bush tax cuts would have produced a tsunami of new jobs. Boehner seems willing to reach a deal if his tea party base will let him, but it won?t.

For all the religious language tossed about the political landscape these days, it appears that the 25th chapter of the Gospel of Matthew is no longer considered much of a moral yardstick in our culture. House Republicans have found a new savior in Ayn Rand and her brand of social Darwinism. They believe that the market is immune to moral criticism and that if government would only get out of the way and let corporate America run the show, all would be well with the world.

Government has gotten ?in the way? because the results of laissez-faire economics demanded it. The government erected Social Security after the laissez-faire policies of the 1920s caused the Great Depression. When business was unable or unwilling to find a way to provide health care to seniors, government created Medicare in the 1960s. When pollution threatened our air and water in the 1970s, government stepped in to protect them by passing the Clean Air and Clean Water Acts. It is shocking that so soon after the ostentatious greed of Wall Street brought on the worst recession in memory, the reputation of the free market would be so easily rebuilt.

It is an odd dynamic that has today?s Republican leaders, who so regularly make use of religious language, willing to roll back society?s commitment to the poor and vulnerable in order to protect tax breaks for the superrich. The way our society treats the ?least of these? remains the only adequate moral measure of a government budget. Congress should listen to the broad chorus of religious leaders, including our bishops, and not balance the budget on the backs of the poor.

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