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Bishops remain mum on economic turmoil

David Gibson Religion News Service | Nov. 15, 2011

BALTIMORE -- Twenty-five years ago, as the U.S. faced an economic crisis and a fierce debate over cutting taxes for the wealthy and limiting benefits for the poor, Catholic bishops issued a landmark statement on social justice that became the touchstone for religious opposition to "trickle down" economics.

This week, as America faces even worse economic circumstances and engages in the same fierce debate over budget priorities, the bishops gathered here for their annual meeting focused on a handful of internal matters and geared up for fights against gay marriage and abortion.

The bishops did not take note of the document's anniversary -- or its core teachings. That shift has dismayed those who believe that this is a moment for the hierarchy to announce the church's views on the economy with the same vigor that it promotes other causes.

"I fear the church's revered social justice witness is being crowded out by divisive culture-war battles at a time when Americans need a stronger moral message about the dignity of work and economic justice for all," wrote Francis X. Doyle, a former top staff official at the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, in a Monday (Nov. 14) op-ed in The Baltimore Sun.

Doyle noted that the Catholic bishops have been advocating for social safety net laws for a century, and their 1986 pastoral letter, "Economic Justice for All," was an extension of that long-standing activism.

But church observers and insiders say the bishops conference has grown more conservative, and that the hierarchy is too divided to produce sweeping documents, or even to mark the anniversary of the 1986 letter without some questioning its teachings.

Indeed, the Vatican issued a major document on the economy last month that was seen as blessing some of the populist anger at the economy, but the bishops meeting here did not even acknowledge the Vatican statement.

"I think the bishops conference is open to question if not criticism on this score," said Russell Shaw, a former spokesman for the bishops who has attended every bishops meeting since 1969.

The bishops counter that despite no high-profile push on economic issues to match the campaign against gay marriage, their conference has been active in lobbying political leaders from the White House to Capitol Hill.

"I can't tell you what the public perception is, I just know what the reality is," said Bishop Howard Hubbard of Albany, N.Y., head of the bishops' Committee on International Justice and Peace.

Hubbard noted that he and Bishop Stephen Blaire of Stockton, Calif., head of the bishops' Committee on Domestic Justice and Human Development, have been writing to members of Congress several times a month, and said bishops have directly lobbied the congressional "Super Committee" that is working to cut more than $1 trillion from future spending.

The bishops' message: "Don't balance the budget on the backs of the poor."

"Even with the so-called fiscal hawks, there are some indications of a willingness to compromise a bit," Hubbard said. "So I think we are making some progress."

Despite the bishops' affinity with the GOP on hot-button moral issues, the bishops' staffers say they have pressed House Speaker John Boehner and Budget Committee Chairman Paul Ryan -- both Catholic Republicans -- on respecting Catholic social justice teachings as they weigh tax and budget cuts.

Hubbard also noted that the Catholic bishops were founding members of the "Circle of Protection" movement that was launched last July by an alliance of religious groups to argue that the budget should protect the poor and vulnerable.

In September, Archbishop Timothy Dolan, USCCB president, asked every bishop to have clergy preach on poverty and economic reform, with a special eye on poor and working-class Americans who have suffered in the financial meltdown.

"These economic failures have fundamental institutional and systemic elements that have either been ignored or made worse by political and economic behaviors," Dolan wrote to the other bishops.

Other USCCB staffers noted -- with frustration -- that many of the bishops' more recent statements about economic issues have been ignored by the media in favor of the hierarchy's messages on sex or abortion and contraception.

Still, more than a few bishops privately noted that the agenda at this meeting was so thin enough to allow time for a discussion of economic issues.

The issue was raised in passing on Tuesday as the bishops debated the conference's top priorities through 2016.

"I'd like to have the conference speak out in a collective voice on behalf of the poor, and especially in our own country, with the international economic meltdown, to not lose sight of fact we have so many working families right now under terrific economic duress," said Bishop George L. Thomas of Helena, Mont.

Thomas said the country could use "the vision and values of Catholic social teaching with the emphasis on the common good and a preferential option for the poor."

That suggestion was tabled, however, as the bishops rallied around two other priorities: promoting a "new evangelization" and defending religious freedom from the encroaching threats of gay marriage and insurance mandates to provide birth control to employees.

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