

Cong. Ryan's Faulty Understanding of Subsidiarity

Michael Sean Winters | Apr. 11, 2012 Distinctly Catholic

Heresy has been defined as "a truth run amok." That definition came to mind when I heard [Cong. Paul Ryan argue during a Christian Broadcasting Network interview](#) [1] that his budget proposals are consonant with Catholic social teaching. Ryan has happened upon the traditional Catholic notion of subsidiarity to justify his position and, for good measure, he also invokes the Church's preferential option for the poor, but gives that teaching a peculiarly laissez-faire slant. Here is the full quote:

A person's faith is central to how they conduct themselves in public and in private. So to me, using my Catholic faith, we call it the social magisterium, which is how do you apply the doctrine of your teaching into your everyday life as a lay person?

To me, the principle of subsidiarity, which is really federalism, meaning government closest to the people governs best, having a civil society of the principal of solidarity where we, through our civic organizations, through our churches, through our charities, through all of our different groups where we interact with people as a community, that's how we advance the common good. By not having big government crowd out civic society, but by having enough space in our communities so that we can interact with each other, and take care of people who are down and out in our communities. Those principles are very very important, and the preferential option for the poor, which is one of the primary tenants of Catholic social teaching, means don't keep people poor, don't make people dependent on government so that they stay stuck at their station in life. Help people get out of poverty out onto life of independence.

First of all, subsidiarity is not "really federalism." Federalism is about establishing diverse loci of power, so as to check any one of those loci from being able to perpetrate tyranny. Subsidiarity is rooted in Catholic personalism, the idea that solutions to human problems are best crafted closest to the human person. But, as I have noted before, subsidiarity is a two-way street. While it insists that solutions be crafted at the lowest level of social organization possible, first the family, then the community, then the State, it also insists that when the lower levels of social organization manifestly fail to achieve the basic necessities of human life, such as health care, the higher levels of social organization must step in to guarantee them.

Mr. Ryan also fails to note that in Catholic social teaching, subsidiarity is always paired with the need for solidarity. Perhaps that section of the catechism was missing from his copy. Evidently, the section of the catechism on the common good was also missing. I would call Mr. Ryan's attention to Item # 1908 of the catechism: "Second, the common good requires the social well-being and development of the group itself. Development is the epitome of all social duties. Certainly, it is the proper function of authority to arbitrate, in the name of the common good, between various particular interests; but it should make accessible to each what is needed to lead a truly human life; food, clothing, health, work, education and culture, suitable information, the right to establish a family, and so on."

Ryan's emphasis on a one-sided understanding of subsidiarity overlooks the fact that the Supreme Pontiff and the U.S. bishops have repeatedly insisted that access to health care is a basic human right. But, it also seems to

me to have more than a little whiff of insincerity. Am I simply unaware of the hard fought efforts of Republican governors or mayors to craft policies that would guarantee health care to all, especially to the elderly? Mr. Ryan proposes turning Medicare into a voucher program. But, what will happen to those for whom the vouchers are insufficient? Has the Republican Governors Association proposed raising taxes to cover the health care expenses of those elderly Americans who will be harmed by Ryan's Medicare overhaul? And, did I miss the speech where Mr. Ryan criticized the governor of his state for attacking unions, which are precisely one of the kinds of intermediate social actors that subsidiarity suggests are needed?

Mr. Ryan has deceived himself. His budget is not in line with Catholic social teaching, it is mere subsidiarity run amok or, better to say, subsidiarity in drag. I would like to credit Mr. Ryan with sincerity. I, too, am alarmed at the growing federal debt and worry that we must address it. But, a budget that employs slanted ideas about subsidiarity to radically alter the social safety net, while asking nothing of the wealthiest Americans, is not a budget that is serious about debt reduction. Mr. Ryan has drunk the libertarian Kool-Aid, and evidently fails to see how discordant his views are with Catholic social teaching. It would be a delightful development to see those charged with being the official teachers of the faith, our bishops, stand up and instruct Mr. Ryan on a proper understanding of subsidiarity and on the other key notes of Catholic social teaching. Otherwise, they, too, will lose credibility. They were not reluctant to pounce on Nancy Pelosi when she mangled the Church's teaching on the sanctity of life. They should not evidence a reluctance to clarify Catholic social teachings and distinguish it from Mr. Ryan's faulty understanding either.

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