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Paul Ryan to get another earful on his 'Catholic' budget

David Gibson Religion News Service | Apr. 25, 2012

Rep. Paul Ryan, R-Wis., shows a copy of his budget during a press conference on Capitol Hill in March. (CNS/Reuters/Jose Luis Magana)

House Budget Committee Chairman Paul Ryan has been enmeshed in an intense debate about his claims that the Republican budget plan he designed reflects Catholic social justice teaching, an assertion rejected by political liberals and Catholic bishops alike.

Ryan is unlikely to get a break from the back-and-forth as he heads to Georgetown University to deliver a lecture on Thursday that might well escalate the conflict rather than ease it.

About 90 faculty and administration members at the flagship Jesuit institution have already penned an open letter to Ryan welcoming him to campus while refuting his interpretation of Catholic teaching.

The signatories, who also sent Ryan a copy of the hefty tome, "The Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church," [1] challenged him to further explain his views and his justification for proposing cuts to social programs and ruling out cuts to the defense budget or tax hikes for the wealthy.

"Our problem with Rep. Ryan is that he claims his budget is based on Catholic social teaching," said Jesuit Fr. Thomas J. Reese, one of the organizers of the letter. "This is nonsense. As scholars, we want to join the Catholic bishops in pointing out that his budget has a devastating impact on programs for the poor."

The Wisconsin Republican, whose stock has risen lately with rumors that he could be tapped as Mitt Romney's running mate, is to deliver the annual Whittington Lecture at the Georgetown Public Policy Institute. The title of his talk is "America's Enduring Promise."

Just how Ryan will engage the Catholic debate is unclear, but his spokesman, Kevin Siefert, indicated that Ryan would not back away from his budget positions.

"Chairman Ryan remains grateful for Georgetown's invitation to advance a thoughtful dialogue this week on his efforts to avert a looming debt crisis that would hurt the poor the first and the worst" Siefert told CNN on Tuesday.

"Ryan looks forward to affirming our shared commitment to a preferential option for the poor, which of course does not mean a preferential option for bigger government."

In an email, Siefert included a selection of recent comments from Ryan that reiterate his arguments that curbing federal spending and runaway debt are his top priorities, and that current poverty levels show that government programs "aren't working the way they should."

Ryan has already pushed back against the hierarchy's statements that his budget plan fails to meet the "moral criteria" of Catholic teaching by saying the criticism -- which was contained in a series of letters to Congress from Bishop Stephen Blaire of Stockton, Calif., the bishops' leader on domestic policy issues -- does not reflect "all the Catholic bishops." He added that "we just respectfully disagree."

House Speaker John Boehner, who is also Catholic, backed Ryan by saying the bishops have to look at the big picture.

"And the bigger look is, if we don't make decisions, these programs won't exist, and then they'll really have something to worry about," Boehner said last week.

Other conservative Catholics have rushed to defend Ryan against the bishops' criticisms. In an opinion piece [2] in *The Washington Post* on Tuesday, Mark Thiessen, a Catholic and former speechwriter for President George W. Bush, accused Blaire of "using Obama's campaign rhetoric" when Blaire wrote that the Ryan budget is "unjust and wrong."

"What is 'unjust and wrong' is this bishop's attack on a good Catholic layman," Thiessen wrote.

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