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Editorial: What do you want the government to be?

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While much ink has been spent, computer time logged and pundit talk devoted to specifics in the budget proposed by Paul Ryan and embraced by Mitt Romney, we would like to take a step back and look at the broader implications of what the Ryan-Romney fiscal philosophy would do.

While people of goodwill may respectfully argue whether converting Medicare to a voucher system is more Randian or Thomist and whether a lower tax on capital gains is an exercise in subsidiarity or not, two things are undeniable about the Ryan-Romney plan: Its overall aim is to dramatically cut government spending and reshape the tax code. At the heart of that plan is an understanding of the purpose of government that is incompatible with the evolution in Catholic understanding of government and the common good.

In a series of letters to Congress this spring, the U.S. bishops said the Ryan budget failed a basic test of morals, using words like "unfair," "unjust and wrong" to describe its various proposals.

Rank-and-file Catholics agree, according to polling by Robert P. Jones of the Public Religion Research Institute. According to Jones:

- Sixty-nine percent of Catholics believe the government should do more to reduce the gap between the rich and the poor.
- Sixty percent of Catholics agree that the growing deficit is a critical issue that needs addressing, but 65 percent say deficit reduction should not be achieved by cutting federal dollars to social programs for the poor.
- Seventy-three percent believe the deficit should be cut by raising taxes on Americans making more than $1 million a year.
- Fifty-five percent say tax breaks for large corporations should be eliminated.

The polling data show Catholics have been imbued with the major tenets of more than 100 years of social teaching. Another way of explaining that phenomenon might be to say that Catholics have thoroughly interiorized the balance between individual and community responsibility, or subsidiarity and solidarity.

Thus, Pope Benedict XVI writes: "Solidarity is first and foremost a sense of responsibility on the part of everyone with regard to everyone, and it cannot therefore be merely delegated to the State" and "Every Christian is called to practice this charity, in a manner corresponding to his vocation and according to the degree of influence he wields in the *pólis*. This is the institutional path -- we might also call it the political path -- of charity, no less excellent and effective than the kind of charity which encounters the neighbor directly, outside the institutional mediation of the *pólis*."

Two of the best thinkers today on Catholic social teaching, subsidiarity and solidarity are Jana Bennett, associate professor of theological ethics at the University of Dayton, and Meghan Clark, an assistant professor of theology and religious studies at St. John's University in New York. Their writing appears on the website catholicmoraltheology.com [1].

Quoting Pope Pius XI's *Quadragesimo Anno*, John XXIII's *Mater et Magistra* and Benedict XVI's *Caritas in Veritate*, Clark notes, "A distinctive element of Catholic social thought is that the community and the government have ... a responsibility to create the necessary conditions for human flourishing."

She says, "The principle of subsidiarity is about the well-ordered society directed towards the common good and this requires the state, individuals, institutions, civil organizations and churches all work together in civil society."

Bennett writes, "In Catholic social teaching it is recognized that quite simply there are some things we can do better together than we can separately. Individual charity is great -- like donating the $5 to the mother next door who needs some Tylenol for her crying baby. But an individual can't offer something even close to approximating SNAP or the VA hospital system."

She says, "Individual charity is essential, and Pope Benedict clearly acknowledges and supports that. But when governments are acting on behalf of the poor in society, they are not doing so out of a notion of the virtue of charity primarily, but rather the virtue of justice."

At the heart of the war of words we will hear over the next few weeks about the budget, deficit and taxes is this question: What do you want government to do?

No program, government or private, will be perfectly free of waste and inconsistencies. Nor would we suggest that government look to any single religious tradition or denomination for its social program. Governments don't work out of sacred texts, but we hope they aspire to achieving justice. The value of a Catholic disposition toward what government should do lies in its inherent concern for other, its communitarian inclinations. All of that leads to an understanding that ultimately the kind of government to which we give assent is inseparable from who we are and the way we relate to each other, including the least of those among us.

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