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Bishops focus on joblessness, poverty in Labor Day statement

Brian Roewe | Aug. 31, 2012

Bishop Stephen E. Blaire (CNS/Bob Roller)

The lack of jobs for millions of Americans and their inability to meet their basic needs represent "a serious economic and moral failure for our nation" and yet "the moral imperative to resist and overcome poverty" is not part of our national conversation, said the U.S. bishops in their annual Labor Day statement.

The lack of conversation is "both ominous and disheartening," the letter said.

"The sad fact is that over 46 million people live in poverty and, most disturbingly, over 16 million children grow up poor in our nation. The link between joblessness and poverty is undeniable," said Stockton, Calif., Bishop Stephen E. Blaire, author of this year's Labor Day statement and chairman of the bishops' Committee on Domestic Justice and Human Development.

Blaire said the country continues to struggle with a broken economy that fails to produce enough jobs, though he did not elaborate on the factors that led to it, instead focusing primarily on the challenge of overcoming poverty.

Fr. Clete Kiley, director of immigration policy at UNITE HERE, said the Labor Day message reprioritized the discussion in an election year by reframing the public conversation about the economy to focus on the poor rather than philosophies.

"[In the public debate] we're talking about the wealthiest, and I think this Labor Day statement is saying, hang on a minute, you begin the conversation by talking about the poorest, and about long-term prevailing poverty, and how you're going to address it," Kiley said.

Blaire wrote, "Despite unacceptable levels of poverty, few candidates and elected officials speak about pervasive poverty or offer a path to overcome it. We need to hear from those who seek to lead this country about what specific steps they would take to lift people out of poverty."

David O'Brien, professor of faith and culture at the University of Dayton, said the statement represented a shift

from the previous year, when the 2011 statement emphasized work, labor unions and seeking the common good. Focusing more on poverty than politics might offer a less contentious approach in an election year, he said.

"This [statement] is a lot more about poverty, and that's probably understandable because poverty is reaching very high levels in this country, and bishops on the ground with Catholic Charities and so on are probably very familiar with that," O'Brien said.

In the 2011 statement, Blaire wrote, "The economy is an incredibly complex interaction of markets, interests, institutions, and structures shaped by people who make innumerable decisions, based on wide variety of obligations, expectations, motives, and choices.

"Financial institutions that were supposed to be responsible were not. Some sought short-term gain and ignored long-term consequences. Some individuals also made irresponsible choices, letting their desire for things, greed, and envy override good judgment and their financial capacity."

The 2012 statement also addressed labor unions, saying that "unions and other worker associations have a unique and essential responsibility in this needed economic renewal," but also criticized such groups when they fail.

"Like other institutions, including religious, business and civic groups, unions sometimes fall short of this promise and responsibility. Some union actions can contribute to excessive polarization and intense partisanship, can pursue positions that conflict with the common good, or can focus on just narrow self-interests," Blaire stated.

"When labor institutions fall short, it does not negate Catholic teaching in support of unions and the protection of working people, but calls out for a renewed focus and candid dialogue on how to best defend workers."

Kiley, who has worked with unions for more than two decades, said he thought the bishops were trying to be realistic while still affirming "the idea of a union is absolutely the right mechanism for workers, if they choose to have it."

"They were saying in a way that not every union is equal and not every union lives up to its ideals. In a way, I thought that was realistic," he said, "but the bottom line was I saw them affirming a union still as probably the best mechanism for workers to protect their rights in the workplace."

At the end of the statement, Blaire noted that the bishops are developing a pastoral reflection on work, poverty and a broken economy, issues he partially addressed in letters to Congress earlier this year. In responding to the debate circling the 2013 federal budget, Blaire wrote a series of four letters to Congress, urging them to create a "circle of protection" around the poor and vulnerable.

Writing to U.S. representatives before the vote on the GOP budget proposed by chairman of the House Budget Committee and now vice presidential candidate Rep. Paul Ryan of Wisconsin, Blaire said, "A just framework

for future budgets cannot rely on disproportionate cuts in essential services to poor persons; it requires shared sacrifice by all, including raising adequate revenues, eliminating unnecessary military and other spending, and addressing the long-term costs of health insurance and retirement programs fairly.

"The Catholic bishops of the United States recognize the serious deficits our country faces, and we acknowledge that Congress must make difficult decisions about how to allocate burdens and sacrifices and balance resources and needs. However, deficit reduction and fiscal responsibility efforts must protect and not undermine the needs of poor and vulnerable people. The proposed cuts to programs in the budget reconciliation fail this basic moral test," Blaire said in the May 8 letter.

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