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Voting for authentic human development

Alex Mikulich | Oct. 29, 2012
Viewpoint

The nation stands at a critical crossroad in the 2012 presidential election. While neither candidate advances policies that fully cohere with a consistent ethic of life, the framework of authentic human development sheds light on significant differences in the candidates' economic policies.

Pope Benedict XVI's *Caritas in Veritate* emphasizes authentic human development as a holistic, person-centered approach to economics that celebrates the responsibility of society, including government, to care for every person, especially the economically vulnerable, as an imperative of the Gospel.

Addressing the economic crisis of 2009, Benedict contends that unfettered commercial logic wreaked havoc in every sphere of social, economic and environmental life. Markets have become places where the strong subdue the weak with no regard for social justice, Benedict laments, and without regard for building relationships "of friendship, solidarity and reciprocity" that should be integral to economic activity.

The Romney-Ryan economic plan fails the test of authentic human development in Catholic social teaching at least three ways.

The first problem of the Romney-Ryan plan is that it would increase already scandalous levels of income and wealth inequality and poverty. In his book *The Price of Inequality: How Today's Divided Society Endangers Our Future*, Joseph E. Stiglitz, a winner of the Nobel Prize in Economics, explains that economic elites have created a regressive tax system, one in which the top 1 percent in income and wealth pay a lower fraction of their income than do those who are far poorer.

Gov. Mitt Romney responds that giving more to the rich leads to a larger pie, so that the piece of the pie that the poor get is enlarged. A recent scrutiny of federal tax policies since 1945 by the nonpartisan Congressional Research Service, however, finds that tax cuts produce no economic growth.

Stiglitz counters that the size of the economic pie has been diminishing for most Americans while the top 1 percent take increasingly larger pieces. Even in the wake of the Great Recession, "the wealthiest 1 percent of households had 225 times the wealth of the typical American, almost double the ratio of 1962 or 1983." Simultaneously, incomes of the working poor are constricting as they struggle to make ends meet on the minimum wage and/or multiple part-time jobs. This is scandalous because it denies human dignity, thwarts solidarity, and threatens the fragile conditions of authentic human development.

Second, the Romney plan would move the nation closer to plutocracy. As Robert Reich observes, unlike Presidents Teddy Roosevelt and Franklin D. Roosevelt, who were both wealthy but who advanced policies to limit monopolies and champion the interests of workers and the poor, "Romney is not a traitor to his class. He is a sponsor of his class."

Given Republican efforts in 12 states to suppress the votes of African-Americans, Latinos, the elderly and the

poor, it strains credulity to imagine how a Romney administration would serve authentic human development for all Americans.

Third, Romney's plan to drastically cut government spending fails the test of history. President Herbert Hoover's austerity turned the 1929 crash into the Great Depression. Citing recent historical evidence of the failure of austerity measures in East Asia and Europe, Stiglitz likens the contemporary myth of austerity to doctors who believed in bloodletting in the Middle Ages and insisted on more even when the patient didn't get better. Even if Romney's tax cuts were revenue-neutral (as he claims), the Economic Policy Institute projects his plan would cause job losses of 608,000 in 2013 and nearly 1.3 million in 2014.

As the Center on Policy and Budget Priorities explains in detail, Romney's proposal to cap federal spending at 20 percent of gross domestic product and boost defense spending to 4 percent of GDP would require deep cuts to programs for the poor, elderly, unemployed and disabled that "would cause the incomes of large numbers of households to fall below the poverty line." Romney's plan heaps burdens on the most vulnerable Americans, contradicting the church's moral priority to protect the poor.

The word *stimulus* is not a profanity; Stiglitz contends unemployment would have exceeded 12 percent and may have remained at that level without the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009. More importantly, as Michael Grunwald explains in *The New New Deal: The Hidden Story of Change in the Obama Era*, the act is not only about creating new jobs that revitalize transportation and communication infrastructures, but prioritizing fundamental human needs for the 21st century. That includes shifting away from fossil fuel dependency and carbon emissions, modernizing health care and education, creating a more progressive tax code, and making government more efficient. These are economic priorities that set the conditions for the possibility of authentic human development in the 21st century.

[Alex Mikulich is co-author of *The Scandal of White Complicity in U.S. Hyper-incarceration: A Nonviolent Spirituality of White Resistance*, to be released by Palgrave MacMillan in February 2013.]

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