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Editorial: 'Fiscal cliff' presents moral questions

NCR Editorial Staff | Dec. 10, 2012
Editorial

The negotiations under way in Washington over the "fiscal cliff" have, so far, involved a lot of empty talk about compromise, plenty of competing economic claims, and tons of special-interest lobbying. It has been well said that if you want to know what a society values, look to its tax code. Ours is a mess, a congeries of special-interest loopholes and outdated deductions. Most importantly, the current tax code has failed to serve as a brake on the growing income inequality that is our nation's most urgent fiscal problem.

We do not begrudge achievement or success. We do not advocate class warfare. But the U.S. economy has grown increasingly Dickensian in the last 30 years, with the rich getting richer and the poor getting poorer, and the middle class getting squeezed. A dozen nations now evidence greater social mobility than America, and no amount of anecdotal Horatio Alger stories will change that reality.

If ever there was a time for a nuanced, intelligent and articulate Catholic voice, now is that time. The Catholic church has long taught a simple proposition that should guide our nation's lawmakers as they chart the fiscal future: The economy is made for people, not people for the economy. The measure of economic success is not merely an increasing GDP. The measure of economic success must be whether or not the economy serves the broader interests of society: justice and fairness, shared prosperity, a decent and living wage to all workers, validation of the right to organize, unemployment compensation for those who lose their jobs, a secure retirement for all, and sufficient time for families to spend together as they wish.

This is the vision that the church's magisterium has championed explicitly for more than 120 years, since Pope Leo XIII penned his seminal encyclical Rerum Novarum. Pope Benedict XVI issued the most recent iteration of papal social teaching in his encyclical Caritas in Veritate. There, Benedict wrote, "The dignity of the individual and the demands of justice require, particularly today, that economic choices do not cause disparities in wealth to increase in an excessive and morally unacceptable manner, and that we continue to prioritize the goal of access to steady employment for everyone. ... Therefore, it must be borne in mind that grave imbalances are produced when economic action, conceived merely as an engine for wealth creation, is detached from political action, conceived as a means for pursuing justice through redistribution."

Benedict perceived accurately the connection between political action and economic action. He understands that, whatever our concerns about government's capacity for overreach or worries about excessive bureaucracy, only the state has the power and the authority to stand up to the powerful economic interests in society and demand justice. Indeed, the current economic cliff negotiations highlight in an acute form the fact that America is today faced with a question more profound than how to adjust the tax code. The deep question is whether or not we as a people are still capable of self-governance. Will we Americans be able to chart a future that has room for everyone, not just for the wealthy?

These questions are not primarily economic questions, they are moral questions. This is why the church's voice is needed. Two summers ago, the bishops achieved a major victory: Working with other religious leaders behind

the scenes, they brokered a deal that saved critical antipoverty programs such as food stamps and Medicaid from the dreaded sequestration cuts. We applaud them for this. But the current debate is happening in public and will involve, it must involve, the American people.

The bishops need to make the Catholic case in the public square, loudly and repeatedly calling legislators to find a balanced approach to the nation's fiscal challenges.

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