NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

Values & The Fiscal Cliff

Michael Sean Winters | Dec. 11, 2012 Distinctly Catholic

Values. I do not like it when our religion is reduced to ethics, as regular readers know. The important thing to know about the Catholic faith is not that it imparts good values to its communicants but that it imparts the Word of God which saves us from final damnation. We hold to what we believe because it is true, not because it is efficacious. And, because it is true, because God?s verdict on this person known as Jesus was different from the verdict rendered by Pilate, then the teachings of Jesus become normative. They do not depend for their normativity on success: In worldly terms, it needs scarcely be pointed out, Jesus did not succeed. So, too, with the apostles. To borrow a metaphor from Kierkegaard, our confidence in the teachings of St. Paul reside in the apostolic authority of those teachings. The fact that Paul met with some success as a preacher, or that he was a very fine tentmaker, is irrelevant.

The teachings of Jesus could not be more clear when it comes to how we engage the poor. Indeed, the Hebrew Scriptures were clear on this point too: Neglecting the needs of the poor is evil. As Archbishop Charles Chaput recently said, if we do not care for the poor, we are going to hell. And, as we celebrate Advent, the words of the Magnificat ring in our ears: ?He has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he will send away empty.? I jokingly encouraged Cardinal Dolan to recite the Magnificat at this summer?s Republican National Convention because one thing was clear about Mitt Romney?s GOP: The rich will not be sent away empty.

Mitt Romney has left the political stage, but I remain dumbfounded by the Republican Party?s values when it comes to budget negotiations. They are digging in on the need to maintain lower tax rates for the wealthiest of Americans. They are determined to achieve cuts in those programs, Medicare and Medicaid, that provide health care to those that can?t afford it.

Four years ago, when the economy collapsed and Wall Street needed bailing out, Republicans did not ask any questions about the long-term fiscal impact of the government bailout. To be clear: They made the right decision. The government could not stand by and watch the economy collapse. Most Democrats went along with the bailouts. But, why was it urgent then to protect Wall Street, and it is not urgent now to protect Medicaid? Eleven years ago, when America launched two wars, no one asked how the government would pay for these wars. Why was it okay to ignore the long-term fiscal consequences then, but now, when it comes to food stamps, we have to worry and wrangle over the implication for the federal budget deficit. In both instances, the bailout and the wars, whether you agree with the decisions or not, it is clear that in the face of a national emergency, no one worried about the costs.

Millions of our fellow Americans have not had access to affordable health care insurance for decades. I was one of those people for three of the last ten years and it is very scary. Why is that not a national emergency? As a result of the economic collapse, many Americans lost their jobs and were pushed into poverty. Why is making sure they have food on their tables not a national emergency? Because of the housing bubble, many Americans have lost their homes or remain underwater on their mortgages. Why is that not an emergency? You can tell what a person values based on how quickly they move to defend it. I think we, as a nation, were right to go into

Afghanistan, wrong to go into Iraq, and right to bailout Wall Street. But, if you differ on the rightness or wrongness of these actions is not the salient point here. The key is why other issues, but not fighting poverty, warrant a defense.

I read in this morning?s paper that many Republican governors are trying to find halfway measures to avoid expanding Medicaid in their states. The administration, correctly, has responded that the Affordable Care Act does not provide for such half-measures. But, why do states routinely give huge tax cuts to the owners of sports teams or spend hundreds of millions on a new stadium, or lavish other perks on business owners, but they just can?t find the revenue to help their own people get health care? Every bishop in America, every state Catholic Conference, every Catholic in the pew, should contact their governors this week and urge them to expand Medicaid so that it covers more of the poor and near-poor.

The issue of entitlements is not an easy issue. The long-term implications of demographic changes make those programs unsustainable as they are currently conceived. But, they are unsustainable because our political culture has grown allergic to the idea of raising taxes. As I argued yesterday, it is not like our people are not reaping the benefits of the more expensive medical technologies that have caused health care costs to rise, they are. But, we need to pay for them. And, in America, for many decades, the way we pay for them is through a progressive tax system. The first step towards fixing entitlements is to convert the current regressive tax collection system to a more progressive one. This is especially the case because so many corporations have been abandoning their commitments to pension plans, pushing more of the retirement costs of the population on to the government itself.

It would be nice if we lived in a political culture in which the phrase ?middle class? did not require that we bend the knee. As the USCCB?s Director of Domestic Policy, Kathy Saile, said at a Catholic University event this autumn on poverty, ?Jesus did not say, ?whatever you do unto the middle class, you do unto me.?? But, this is one of the prices we pay for our democracy. Additionally, while there are some in the middle class who have done quite well, there are many towards the lower end of the scale who still struggle. But, I confess that there is something a little craven in the way the Democrats have been so keen to mention, ad nauseum, their concern about middle class tax rates while so little rhetorical attention is paid to the poor.

Blessings upon the politician who is willing to speak the truth to the American people: We need to raise taxes to pay for the government we want. Such a plea would be made more likely to succeed if it came on the heels of a truly rigorous effort to restrain federal spending. But, the time has come fiscally, if not politically, for the nation to recognize the real choices it needs to make. We can cut the costs of Medicare and Medicaid tomorrow by simply saying that these programs will no longer pay for MRIs or CAT scans or other expensive procedures. Or, we can pay for those expensive machines and procedures. What we can?t do is to continue to enjoy the benefits without paying for them.

Sadly, in Washington today, neither party is keen to embrace the needs of the poor, nor speak to our civic and societal obligation to care for the poor, still less our moral obligation to do so. And, today?s GOP is spending all of its chits defending a lower tax bracket for millionaires. It is a moral scandal. And, regrettably, I do not see it getting better anytime soon.

Source URL (retrieved on *02/10/2016 - 05:20*): http://ncronline.org/blogs/distinctly-catholic/values-fiscal-cliff