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Gasp! U.S. bishops say nice things about President Obama

by Tom Gallagher

NCR Today

Perennial letter writers Bishop Stephen Blaire of Stockton, Calif., and Bishop Richard Pates of Des Moines, Iowa, who chair the USCCB Committees on Domestic Justice and Human Development and International Justice and Peace, respectively, wrote another letter to members of Congress; however, this time they extolled many aspects of President Barack Obama's proposed federal budget. They "commended" the president, they "appreciated" the president's administration and they "appreciate and support" the president's focus on refugees.

In an environment when what I call the Republican Catholic Bishops Caucus -- which includes Cardinal Timothy Dolan, Cardinal Francis George, Cardinal Raymond Burke, Archbishop Charles Chaput, Archbishop William Lori, Bishop Robert Finn, Bishop Thomas Paprocki, Bishop Robert Morlino and certain members of their USCCB staff -- has been hammering and suing the president, trying to find any hint of something positive actually being said about Obama is harder than the Sunday *New York Times* crossword puzzle.

As a result, these modest yet positive words from two relatively quiet bishops is noteworthy.

In their joint letter to Congress dated April 24, Blaire and Pates said:

The President should be commended for his concern for those living in or near poverty, especially children and families. Investing in parental options for early childhood education; capitalizing the National Housing Trust Fund; reforming child support and fatherhood initiatives to encourage noncustodial fathers' reengagement in children's lives; and increasing mental health services for youth, families, service members, and veterans will all strengthen the family unit, the fundamental cell of

society. We also support making permanent recent improvements in the Earned Income and Child Tax Credits. These credits decrease child poverty, support family formation, and encourage employment.

We appreciate the Administration's continued commitment to poverty-focused international assistance.

Congress should ensure robust funding for HIV/AIDS, maternal and child health, and other humanitarian and development programs. The President's proposal includes significant changes to Food for Peace that give implementing agencies greater flexibility and end monetization, reforms we have long sought. We urge care, however, to ensure that funding is sustained long term.

Likewise, we appreciate and support the President's request for assistance to refugee populations, including funding for the Migration and Refugee Assistance (MRA) account and the Emergency Migration and Refugee Assistance (ERMA) account. We ask that you improve upon his request but, at a minimum, preserve the proposed levels.

Of course, these two bishops could not allow Obama off the hook entirely. So they criticized the president's budget:

The President's proposal moves Food for Peace funding allocated for food needs during emergencies to International Disaster Assistance (IDA) while substantially cutting existing IDA programs. The proposed reductions are deeply troubling, especially as humanitarian needs grow in places like Syria. Congress should reject these cuts in shelter and medical assistance to very vulnerable populations.

The President proposes cuts to the nuclear Global Threat Reduction Initiative, as nuclear proliferation threats multiply, at the same time increasing funding for nuclear modernization programs. We oppose these shifts. Investing in nuclear weapons systems undercuts the long-term goal of working for a world free from nuclear weapons.

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Of course, Catholic Republican and self-anointed budget expert Rep. Paul Ryan and the 50-plus Catholic House Republicans who have entirely ignored bishops Blaire and Pates' prior letters will no doubt ignore them again. No worries for the Catholic House Republicans. The Republican Catholic Bishops Caucus has their backs.

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