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On budgetary matters, Paul Ryan is still wrong

by Tom Gallagher

NCR Today

As I have pointed out on more than one occasion over the past year or so, the Republican Party's budget wizard, Catholic House Rep. Paul Ryan of Wisconsin, needs help with simple math for his budget assumptions as his math doesn't add up.

It has become sport to watch economist Paul Krugman and many others demystify Ryan's budget "analysis." Each such article acted like one was watching the curtain pulled back on the great Wizard of Oz.

Ryan doubled down to claim his budget proposal contained not only fiscal probity, but that he wrapped his budget in Catholic social teaching. Academics and the nuns quickly debunked such oddball claims by Ryan, as his budget doesn't even come close to resembling Catholic social teaching.

Even two timid Catholic bishops kept writing Ryan and his colleagues pointing out that his budget was a "moral failure," albeit to no avail.

Now comes Jonathan Chait at *New York Magazine*, who like Krugman and so many others, dismantles Ryan's analysis of fiscal reality.

Says Chait:

"Changes in the way we think about the world are not 'news' in the classic sense—they occur gradually, without discrete events to signal them. But they matter. Two such developments have come together recently, both reported in the *New York Times*. The first is the collapse of intellectual support for the notion that immediate austerity can boost economic growth. The second is a growing consensus that health-care-cost inflation is slowing for deep structural

reasons, rather than having undergone a mere temporary dip from the recession. These trends have something in common: They blow to smithereens the intellectual foundations of the Obama-era Republican policy agenda.

During the last four years, the hoary Republican nostrums of lower taxes, spending, and regulation have cohered into a specific view of the world. Paul Ryan has been the leading figure in defining this view and persuading the entire party, almost without exception, to fall in line behind it. The Ryan worldview is that the United States is heading toward a massive debt crisis, that the crisis is driven primarily by rising health-care costs, and only his plan stands any chance of alleviating it. Ryan has expounded this view over and over..."

He concludes:

"And yet the canon of Levin and Ryan has undergone no revision whatsoever. The debt crisis is ?irrefutably happening,? Ryan insisted recently. Obamacare, he said yesterday, will ?collapse under its own weight.? Ryan and his party are so certain of these foundations his worldview rests upon that he can?t even be bothered to look down at the rubble all around his feet."

Austerity Kills

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David Stuckler, a senior research leader in sociology at Oxford, and Sanjay Basu, an assistant professor of medicine and an epidemiologist in the Prevention Research Center at Stanford, are the authors of ?The Body Economic: Why Austerity Kills.?

The two wrote a lengthy op-ed Sunday in the *New York Times*, which is mandatory reading for anyone even casually interested in the federal budget fight. The authors review the reality in Europe where austerity budgets were slashed wantonly to devastating results.

They then take a look at how things are playing out in the U.S:

"Somewhere between these extremes is the United States. Initially, the 2009 stimulus package shored up the safety net. But there are warning signs ? beyond the higher suicide rate ? that health trends are worsening. Prescriptions for antidepressants have soared. Three-quarters of a million people (particularly out-of-work young men) have turned to binge drinking. Over five million Americans lost access to health care in the recession because they lost their jobs (and either could not afford to extend their insurance under the Cobra law or exhausted their eligibility). Preventive medical visits dropped as people delayed medical care and ended up in emergency rooms. (President Obama?s health care law expands coverage, but only gradually.)

The \$85 billion ?sequester? that began on March 1 will cut nutrition subsidies for approximately 600,000 pregnant women, newborns and infants by year?s end. Public housing budgets will be cut by nearly \$2 billion this year, even while 1.4 million homes are in foreclosure. Even the budget of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the nation?s main defense against epidemics like last year?s fungal meningitis outbreak, is being cut, by at least \$18 million."

And their conclusion:

"One need not be an economic ideologue ? we certainly aren?t ? to recognize that the price of

austerity can be calculated in human lives. We are not exonerating poor policy decisions of the past or calling for universal debt forgiveness. It's up to policy makers in America and Europe to figure out the right mix of fiscal and monetary policy. What we have found is that austerity ? severe, immediate, indiscriminate cuts to social and health spending ? is not only self-defeating, but fatal."

Why then do so many cardinals, bishops and Catholic lay people support Congressman Ryan, and the 50-plus Catholic House Republicans who vote in lock-step in support of his federal budget proposal, when Ryan's proposed cuts, if implemented, would be fatal?

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