

## Ryan Takes Another Stab

Michael Sean Winters | Apr. 26, 2012 Distinctly Catholic

[Congressman Paul Ryan has an article up at the National Catholic Register](#) [1] in which he tries to rehabilitate his claim that his budgetary proposals, which have been adopted by the GOP-led House, are consistent with Catholic social teaching.

At the outset, let's acknowledge that Ryan has at least decided to speak the word that has evaded him in the past — solidarity — and paired it, appropriately, with subsidiarity. But, alas, he seems incapable of recognizing the way certain government social programs enmesh the principle of solidarity, for example, Social Security, Medicare and Medicaid. These programs stand for the proposition that a person who has lived a long life and contributed to his or her society should not have to worry about falling into poverty nor live in fear that their medical bills will eviscerate their life savings nor force them into life-denying medical decisions on account of cost considerations. In the case of Medicaid, that program enmeshes the principle that access to health care is a basic human right, and that no one should be denied health care because they can't afford it.

Instead, Ryan sees only the downside of what he terms a "misapplication of solidarity." He thinks that the default position of those advocating for solidarity is "big government," notes, correctly, that both parties have been part of the expansion of big government, but claims that these programs have led to "dismal results." He notes that one-sixth of all Americans live in poverty today — "the largest number of poor people on record." Did you see the sleight of hand? Yes, America's population is such that we now have more poor people than in times past. Also more rich people. Also more middle class people. But, does Ryan really think the poverty rate would go down if entitlement spending evaporated? Does he not recognize that amidst the very bleak poverty numbers of the past few years, one group did not slip into poverty, the elderly, and that Social Security and Medicare might have something to do with that?

More especially, Ryan fails to answer the more basic question: In America, who will be able to stand up to the moneyed interest to secure other important social goods and, indeed, basic human necessities like health care when the market demonstrably fails to provide them? If the market is the only means to deliver a social good like universal health care, why has it failed to do so? In American history, and in America today, the only social organization with the power to stand up to the moneyed interest is the government. That is why people turn to the government to secure those social necessities the market has not delivered. And, in Catholic moral teaching, those social necessities — food, health care, shelter — must be secured.

Ryan claims that his budget will rectify this "misapplication of solidarity" by balancing it with subsidiarity. But, where in his budget do we see evidence of subsidiarity? Turning everything over to the market is not subsidiarity. As I have pointed out before, Ryan's claims to be instancing subsidiarity would be more credible if he was part of a GOP-led movement to actually turn state or local government into a laboratory for finding ways to better deliver health care and other basic human necessities. But, if Republican governors and state legislators and mayors have been trying to find creative ways to do so, it is the best kept secret in the world. Turning everything over to the market is no solution and blabbing on about the freedom the market affords is worse than no solution — it is a lie. The market is liberating for those with means. The Lord Jesus, in countless examples in

the Gospels, stood by and stood with those who lacked means. The Church has always stood not only with those who lack means, but with those who will never possess means, those whose disadvantages in life are too crippling, those who are aged and alone, those for whom "opportunity" is simply a five-syllable word. I do not only fault Ryan for this - all American politicians, obliged to be optimistic by our national character, must be sunny, all must talk about opportunity and the brave possibilities of the future. But, the Church, especially the sisters, have always taken care of those our society would call "losers," because we know something the politicians don't - these losers are the apple of God's eye.

There is a consequentialism in capitalism that is repugnant to Catholic sensibilities. We are called, as Catholics, to care for the poor. The Gospel does not focus overmuch on how we are to do so, only that we are to do so. Ryan's hope that lower tax rates on the super-rich will somehow lift all boats and solve all social ills, a claim that really does not bear much historical scrutiny or else the Bush years would have been different from what they were, would be more credible if he admitted that there are worse things than a "culture of dependency." A culture of indifference is worse.

What is most astonishing, however, is Ryan's claim that his tax proposals are "fair and equitable." There is one sense in which "equitable" suggests impartiality and I suspect that is the meaning Ryan intends. But, "equitable" also means just, and in Catholic teaching, there is a clear and consistent focus on distributive justice. Ryan and his tax-cutting friends can't really address the demands of distributive justice with a straight face. Nor, I will admit, does our culture afford the language or the logic for focusing on distributive justice. The idea is tied to ideas about the common good, a substantive ethics of the good, that have been lost in our modern understanding of society as governed by a formal ethics of rights. To be clear, the problem here is not only with Ryan. It is America's problem and the article I called readers' attention to last week - Professor David Schindler's article on the HHS mandates - shows just how deep the problem is.

I am heading over to Georgetown today to listen Cong. Ryan deliver a lecture. (Ergo, no more posts until this afternoon.) Hopefully he will grapple, as we all must, with the difficulties his dominant approach to public issues entail, and not just deliver a campaign speech about why his views are preferable to others. At a university, one should acknowledge the limits of one's claims, and wrestle with the ideas of others, not deliver talking points. We shall see. I am glad Ryan seems so eager to understand and apply Catholic social teaching. I hope someone will hand him some good *Communio* theology so he will see just how problematic modern capitalism is. This is a discussion worth having, but what cannot be lost amidst the rival claims of different policy advocates is the Christian truth that we are called to care for the least among us, no matter what the cost.

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