

USCCB Tackles Paul Ryan

Michael Sean Winters | Apr. 18, 2012 Distinctly Catholic

Yesterday, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops released the texts of four letters to various House committee chairs in which the bishops assess the moral ramifications of the federal budget. In each of the letters (links to the texts can be found [here](#) [1]), the bishops reiterate the key criteria for such moral evaluations, the protection of human dignity, how proposals affect "the least of these," and whether or not a given proposal advances the common good. The bishops could not be more clear in rendering their verdict: "The House-passed budget resolution fails to meet these moral criteria."

The letters come shortly after Cong. Paul Ryan defended his budget proposals as consistent with Catholic social teaching. Better to say, Ryan defended his budget in terms of one Catholic social teaching, subsidiarity, but he neglected to mention, or perhaps does not realize, that subsidiarity is part, not the whole, of Catholic social teaching, that subsidiarity must be paired with solidarity, and that his hyper-individualistic approach to policy, born of his attraction to libertarian economic ideas, finds no place within the rich fabric of concern for the common good that has always been at the heart of Catholic social teaching.

This last point is, I believe, the most contentious, but it is related to the others. Ryan, [in his CBN interview](#) [2], said this: "Those principles are very very important, and the preferential option for the poor, which is one of the primary tenants of Catholic social teaching, means don't keep people poor, don't make people dependent on government so that they stay stuck at their station in life. Help people get out of poverty out onto life of independence." Well, that is not exactly what the preferential option for the poor means. Yes, it is always a good idea to help people climb out of poverty, to teach a man to fish rather than merely giving him a fish. But, there are limits to this "every man an Horatio Alger" view of society. First of all, there are people who will never be able to fish, or fend, for themselves and not because they are lazy but because some people are dealt a bad set of cards in life. These are the people Jesus sought out and held close to himself. Their dignity is as certain as Cong. Ryan's and their claim upon the attention and care of society is non-negotiable. If this creates a "culture of dependency" we must try to make sure that culture does not hamper others from flourishing, but, yes, we do aspire, as Catholics, to a culture in which all people, especially our society's modern day lepers, know they can depend on the rest of us to care for them.

It is common for some progressive Catholics to cite the example of the early apostles, especially during this Easter season when we hear the Acts of the Apostles proclaimed each day at Mass. The apostles and their followers held everything in common, and gave to the poor. Their example is certainly normative for all subsequent Christians. But, some conservatives argue that there is a difference because those early Christians chose to be charitable, they did not organize their charitable efforts as part of a government program, and so while they admit the need for Christians to be charitable as individuals, they deny the role of government in caring for the poor. This line of conservative reasoning flounders in two regards. It is clear from centuries of magisterial teaching that in addition to personal charity, Catholics are called to ensure that their society, and its government, act in ways that are consistent with the demands of justice, including distributive justice, and justice is itself a form of charity in the deepest sense of the word charity, in the sense of the word charity that Pope Benedict XVI intended in his encyclical *Caritas in Veritate*. Charity and justice are never at odds.

Secondly, this conservative critique, dripping with contempt at the role of government in achieving justice and promoting charity, and alleging that we citizens are being "forced" by government to give over "our" money to bankroll policies that help slackers, misunderstands democracy. They like to talk about the founding when it suits them, but they seem to forget one of the principal arguments that led to the Revolution in the first place. The colonists did not object to taxes, they objected to taxation without representation. In our democracy, the government does not, because it cannot, "take our money." We consent, by means of elections, to being taxed.

Let us look at the three specific criteria the bishops have consistently applied to federal budgetary decisions in their own words:

- 1. Every budget decision should be assessed by whether it protects or threatens human life and dignity.*
- 2. A central moral measure of any budget proposal is how it affects "the least of these" (Matthew 25). The needs of those who are hungry and homeless, without work or in poverty should come first.*
- 3. Government and other institutions have a shared responsibility to promote the common good of all, especially ordinary workers and families who struggle to live in dignity in difficult economic times.*

Now, ask yourself: Does that look like the Ryan budget to you?

The bishops also acknowledge what Ryan cites as his chief concern, the need to rein in federal spending because it is "immoral" to leave our children and grandchildren with our bill. Fair enough. Setting aside the fact that the federal debt is not really passed on to our children so much as it is to future purchasers of federal bonds, Ryan's stated concern would be more believable if his budget proposals used the savings from his proposed cuts to reduce the deficit. Instead, his budget proposals shovel the money from the cuts in programs that help the poor into the bank accounts of the wealthiest of the wealthy via huge new tax cuts. This defies common sense: If tax cuts were the panacea Ryan thinks they are, why were the Bush years so anemic economically?

Here, too, the bishops stand in clear and consistent opposition to the priorities of the GOP: "Congress faces a difficult task to balance needs and resources and allocate burdens and sacrifices," they write. "Just solutions, however, must require shared sacrifice by all, including raising adequate revenues, eliminating unnecessary military and other spending, and fairly addressing the long-term costs of health insurance and retirement programs." Did I miss the "shared sacrifice" in the Ryan budget? Did I miss the elimination of unnecessary military spending? Did I miss the adequate revenue?

Some on the left have been highly critical of the USCCB lately, charging them with serving as tools of the GOP because of their embrace of the cause of religious liberty. I hope that all liberal Catholics will congratulate the bishops on these magnificent letters and urge them to continue to fight for the poor and the vulnerable in our society. The poor have no K Street lobbyists to make their case in the halls of Congress. The vulnerable do not constitute a well-financed, well-organized special interest, able to dispense campaign cash to purchase influence. But, week-in and week-out, year-in and year-out, the USCCB has been fighting for programs that assist the poor and vulnerable, serving as the voice of the voiceless. They deserve high praise for these efforts.

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Links:

[1] <http://www.usccb.org/news/2012/12-063.cfm>

[2] <http://blogs.cbn.com/thebrodyfile/archive/2012/04/10/only-on-brody-file-paul-ryan-says-his-catholic-faith.aspx>