

The Ryan budget: antithetical to Catholic social teaching

Maureen Fiedler | Apr. 11, 2012 NCR Today

Rep. Paul Ryan, House Budget Committee Chair and author of a draconian Republican budget that recently passed the House on a party-line vote, was on the Christian Broadcasting Network (CBN) saying that his Catholic faith helped him shape the proposal. He said his budget was consistent with Catholic social justice teachings.

"A person's faith is central to how they conduct themselves in public and in private," Ryan said.

Then he tried to make a moral case for his budget, saying the government is not responsible for lifting its citizens out of poverty -- rather, that it's the obligation of the citizens themselves.

But who or what is the government, if not the collective action of citizens? When it comes to economic policy, governments are often indispensable vehicles of social justice because they can touch everyone in society. They are one way -- an important way -- that citizens can act to lift people out of poverty.

Ryan doesn't agree.

"Through our civic organizations, through our churches, through our charities, through all of our different groups where we interact with people as a community, that's how we advance the common good, by not having big government crowd out civic society, but by having enough space in our communities so that we can interact with each other and take care of people who are down and out in our communities," Ryan said in the interview.

Who's crowding out whom? The government helps fund a lot of these charitable groups. Or what was the faith-based initiative? All these private religious groups and their work to help the poor are praiseworthy, but they are no substitute for government. Just ask anyone who works for any of them. They will tell you: We can't do this alone; we need government help.

Then, in an amazing statement, Ryan added, "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 into a life of independence."

Well, of course, this is obvious. The object is NOT to keep people poor and dependent. Ryan sets up government as a "straw person" and creates the image of a "welfare loafer" or the like. No one -- in government or out -- is aiming for anything EXCEPT getting people out of poverty.

Some prominent Catholics have weighed in on Ryan's budget. Steve Schneck, director of the Institute for Policy Research & Catholic Studies at Catholic University, said the "budget eviscerates vital programs that protect the poor, the elderly, the homeless and at-risk pregnant women and children. This is not pro-life."

And John Gehring, senior writer and Catholic outreach coordinator at Faith in Public Life, said, "The Ryan budget turns centuries of Catholic social teaching on its head to reward the powerful and punish the most

vulnerable. Cutting food assistance for low-income families and coddling the wealthy with more tax breaks betrays Christian principles of solidarity and the common good. It's simply morally indefensible."

You know, I wonder if the bishops will say anything to criticize the Ryan budget and defend Catholic social teaching. I won't hold my breath.

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