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Editorial: Who will represent the poor?

NCR Editorial Staff | Jul. 30, 2012

The economy has without a doubt taken center stage in the 2012 presidential campaign, and for very good reasons.

Economic growth over the last 10 years has been the lowest in any decade since World War II.

The richest Americans are taking an ever larger share of America's bounty. The top-earning 1 percent of households take home 20 percent of total income, up from less than 10 percent 40 years ago, while paying the lowest tax rates in 80 years.

Median family income, adjusted for inflation, has steadily dropped some 6 percent since 2000, the steepest, most prolonged drop since the Great Depression.

The public wants the presidential candidates talking about the economy, it would seem. From January through July, between 65 percent and 71 percent of Americans surveyed in Gallup's running monthly poll have called economic problems the most important problems facing this country today.

And so the candidates talk about the economy. We hear talk of taxes and budgets. It will take time to sort through each candidate's plans, and that is each citizen's responsibility. We would like to focus on the underlying questions: What is the purpose of government? What is our responsibility to other members of our society? How do we regard the most vulnerable among us?

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A few years ago to mark the 50th anniversary of its founding, the Leadership Conference of Women Religious put together "Women and Spirit: Catholic Sisters in America," a traveling exhibition of artifacts, images and multimedia displays that told the story of women religious in the United States from colonial days to present.

The exhibit told the stories, for example, of Mother Mary Frances Sullivan, a Mercy sister who led the effort for public sanitation in Joplin, Mo., in the 1870s, and of Benedictine Sr. Amata Mackett, who sold insurance policies to the lumberjacks of northern Minnesota in an era that had no workers' compensation or social security.

The *NCR* review of the exhibit when it opened in 2009 said that it "tells fascinating stories of sisters whose greatness was the solidarity they shared with ordinary folks while keeping an eye on a larger vision."

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This summer's blistering heat and drought have been nearly matched by red-hot agitation inside the U.S. Catholic church generated from the top down, including caustic, public attacks on President Barack Obama by conservative U.S. bishops, who concocted the notion of an "attack on religious liberty" that permeates federal and state governments out of a single, poorly written Department of Health and Human Services regulation

regarding coverage of contraceptive services. To press their points, a few bishops filed lawsuits and ginned up a "Fortnight for Freedom" campaign to educate, pray and rally around religious freedom.

Meanwhile, Republican members of Congress, led by Catholic Wisconsin Congressman Paul Ryan and endorsed by the presumptive Republican presidential candidate Mitt Romney, have put forward a vicious federal budget proposal that, if implemented, will savage programs that are the very safety net our poor and middle class desperately need. More tax breaks for the wealthy remain the cornerstone of the Republican budget proposals.

Bishops Stephen E. Blaire of Stockton, Calif., and Richard E. Pates of Des Moines, Iowa, chairmen of the U.S. bishops' domestic and international policy committees, respectively, wrote letters to Congress pointing out the moral failures of the Republican budget proposals. The entreaties have had no observable impact on legislators. In fact, the letters are fangless and the elected officials know it.

The U.S. Supreme Court has ruled in favor of the president's signature legislation, the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act. Now Republicans have vowed to overturn this landmark, pro-life law. The House of Representatives recently along party lines voted to repeal the law. Instead of denouncing the Republicans' actions, the U.S. bishops remain silent.

This is why many in the U.S. church feel dispirited and disillusioned, wondering where to find authentic, creative Catholic leadership, leadership that is responsive to today's dynamic circumstances.

To whom do we turn?

The Nuns on the Bus, both literally and figuratively.

In response to the potentially disastrous Republican federal budget proposals, the sisters took their message on an eight-state, two-week bus tour. They started in Iowa and ended at the U.S. Capitol with a moral alternative budget informed by religious ideas. To model an alternative to partisan gridlock, on the 2,700-mile tour they tried to meet with a variety to congressional delegations advocating on behalf of those whose very lives depend on federal safety-net programs, often single parents, women, children and the elderly.

Today's women religious are showing us how to respond to the needs of the marginalized. It may not be through brick and mortar structures, but rather it is in direct relationship with the marginalized and the poorest of the poor. Today's women religious are as critical and relevant to the church and society as their lauded predecessors were in their day.

As we listen to the economic and budgetary matters debated by political candidates over the next three months, let's keep our eyes on the larger vision the sisters showed us:

- Promoting bipartisanship;
- Reining in 10 years of fiscal irresponsibility with measures that won't cut programs that save lives;
- Building an economy on a moral foundation that serves all Americans and not just a privileged few;
- Rejecting radical individualism and instead embracing a commitment to the common good;
- Defending the good that a government "by the people, for the people" can do, especially for the most vulnerable.

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