NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://www.ncronline.org)

What about the children, especially poor children?

Morna Murray | Nov. 9, 2012 NCR Today

On Sept. 4 six national leaders of organizations focused on poverty, particularly child poverty, sent letters [1] to President Barack Obama and Gov. Mitt Romney, asking each man to "please clarify your position with respect to meeting the needs of the 22 percent of America's children who are living in poverty."

A representative of the Romney campaign responded Sept. 25 as follows: "Unfortunately we will be unable to provide a formal written response to this letter ... If there is still interest in holding a meeting, either in person or by phone, let me know and we can make the appropriate arrangements."

Obama responded by letter [2] a bit more substantively, but largely focused on continuing his first-term policies. That said, the president has been a strong supporter of children throughout his first term. His first budget proposed significant investments in children that Congress subsequently and dramatically reduced. The Recovery Act (ARRA) [3] provided critical funding for Head Start and child care, among other low-income supports, to help the most vulnerable children during a time that states simply could not meet that need. And according to a February 2012 analysis [4] from First Focus, a nonpartisan children's organization in Washington, the president has continued to push and even increase children's investments across the board with his FY 2013 budget proposal.

I have worked and continue to be honored to work on behalf of low-income and vulnerable children for almost 25 years. This is no longer the "warm and fuzzy" (or for some, frustratingly complex and/or politically unpopular) policy area that many would like to dismiss. Prominent economists, including Nobel Laureate Dr. James Heckman, have focused on investments in children, particularly early childhood, during which a child's future foundation is laid. Heckman's research finds [5], in addition to enormous increases in positive life outcomes, an economic return of 6 percent to 10 percent per year, much higher than most passbook savings accounts, in early childhood investments. Many members of Congress have heroically carried this mantle for children. Advocates work tirelessly, ceaselessly. Slowly, the message seems to be building, and I have hope the next four years may show improvement.

But for me, there is an increasingly disturbing question as the years (and elections) go on. There is a partner who could exert enormous influence in this fight for poor and underprivileged children, and while it supports these policies, it does little in comparison to its activities on other issues. I am talking about the U.S. Catholic church, specifically the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops.

I haven't heard a letter read from the pulpit (these letters are typically ordered by the bishop for the diocese) regarding the fact that more than one-fifth of the nation's children are living in poverty. Nor have I heard any letters about the fact that here in America, more than 8 million children go to bed hungry every night. I've heard no letters detailing what kind of action (or votes) we should take for the one-third of children with disabilities [6] who live in poverty, or for the millions of children still without health care. For a full report on how America's children are faring, and I'll summarize it for you here -- not at all well -- please read "America's Report Card 2012: Children in the U.S." [7] by First Focus and Save the Children. You will be shocked and alarmed.

So I ask the question that is increasingly disturbing to me: Where is the church's advocacy on children -- on Capitol Hill and in the pulpit -- and in the elections? It's no secret that the church involves itself in multiple social issues, and as it should. It's no secret the church attempts to influence its followers legislatively and politically with regard to certain issues. And it's no secret that these issues are prioritized, with abortion taking the clear lead.

I will not comment on abortion other than to say that the plight of poor children is absolutely and unequivocally as important an issue. I was a Senate staffer on health care reform. Representatives from the bishops were heavily involved in the highest level discussions pertaining to abortion provisions. I did not see them when we were trying to reauthorize Head Start, or Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, or even in the discussions on ending the Bush tax cuts.

This has all been said before, in one way or another. But often, it is dismissed as "those 'fake' liberal Catholics" or "those cafeteria Catholics." We are supposed to toe the line on "the" issues that are the most important, according to someone, somewhere. Tell me, which is more "cafeteria style": supporting a Romney-Ryan ticket because of its stance on abortion while it decimates funding for every single vulnerable American in this country, particularly children? (An analysis [8] from the Children's Defense Fund shows Rep. Paul Ryan's budget would push 900,000 children into poverty and an additional 6.4 million poor children deeper into poverty.) Or is it "cafeteria style" to search for the candidate who best espouses the principles that the church, in its finest moments, stands for? Or perhaps the whole "cafeteria" analogy is just plain absurd. The world is far more complicated than all or nothing.

So I ask again, where is the church when it comes to poor children? Advocates and policy experts need her influence with policymakers in exactly the same way members of Congress are told how the bishops would "like" them to vote on each and every single amendment, no matter how minor, that comes up on abortion.

I grew up Catholic. My mother was a deeply devout Catholic. My father claimed to be agnostic, but had the strongest sense of social justice of anyone I have ever known. When I reflect on the lessons of my parents -- and I loved them both -- I have come to realize that my father, the agnostic, taught me more about Catholic social justice than anyone else.

He taught me by his actions, day in and day out. And the church does the same. I have a deep and abiding respect for the Catholic tradition. But to quote one of the oldest sayings around, actions speak louder than words.

So I ask, with all respect: Bishops, what about the children? What about the poor children? Your influence is significant. There are many critical issues, but none more critical than our children. There is a hierarchy in the church, and that is another subject. But there should never be a hierarchy of issues. I, on behalf of all our children and their advocates, ask you to bring your considerable political influence to bear on their behalf.

Source URL (retrieved on *2016-05-31 15:16*): http://www.ncronline.org/blogs/ncr-today/what-about-children-especially-poor-children

Links:
[1] http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/post-partisan/post/obama-breaks-silence-on-child-poverty/2012/10/16/ad72f93e-17d4-11e2-8792-cf5305eddf60_blog.html
[2] http://www.washingtonpost.com/r/2010-2019/WashingtonPost/2012/10/16/Editorial-Opinion/Graphics/Obama%20child%20poverty%20response.pdf
[3] http://www.gsa.gov/portal/content/105234
[4] http://www.firstfocus.net/news/press_release/new-analysis-shows-obama-budget-continues-to-invest-in-

americas-children
[5] http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sO2oFtY7tZA
[6] http://www.childtrends.org/Files/Child_Trends-2012_10_01_RB_ChildDisabilities.pdf
[7] http://www.firstfocus.net/library/reports/americas-report-card-2012-children-in-the-us
[8] http://www.childrensdefense.org/policy-priorities/budget-watch