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Five adults sit in front of a panel of windows. Panelists are close together and dressed up

John Carr, co-director of the Initiative on Catholic Social Thought and Public Life at Georgetown University, center leads a panel discussion on the debt ceiling May 31, 2023, at Georgetown. Also pictured are the Rev.Jim Wallis, inaugural Chair in Faith and Justice in the McCourt School of Public Policy; Ralph McCloud, director of the U.S. bishops' Catholic Campaign for Human Development; Franciscan Sister Robbie Pentecost, executive director of the New Opportunity School for Women in Berea, Ky.; and Michael Strain, director of economic policy studies and the Arthur F. Burns scholar in political economy at the American Enterprise Institute. (OSV News photo/Lisa Helfert, Georgetown University)

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As U.S. lawmakers considered a bill to address the looming debt ceiling, Catholic and other Christian activists gathered at Georgetown University to discuss how a nation's budget is a moral document detailing its priorities, advocating care for the poor and vulnerable should rank high on that list.

John Carr, founder of the Initiative on Catholic Social Thought and Public Life at Georgetown University, told attendees at the May 31 event that organizers selected Matthew 25 as the centerpiece of the evening's dialogue "because it is a central message of Jesus and the Gospel."

The Gospel passage of Matthew 25 deals with the theme of Jesus Christ's return and spiritual preparedness for his final judgment. The passage concludes with Christ telling those who gave food to him when he was hungry, drink when he was thirsty, welcome when he was a stranger, clothing when he was naked, and visits when he was sick or in prison, to enter into eternal life. Those who did not do these things, Christ condemns to eternal punishment with the Devil and his angels. Both the righteous and unrighteous ask when did they see or do these things for Christ. The Lord says to them, "Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me ... as you did it not to one of the least of these, you did it not to me."

"There's really only one question," Carr said. "How do we treat the least of these? The hungry, the thirsty, the people in greatest need?"

"I fear this central moral criteria is being neglected in my own life, in our churches and in our nation," Carr said.

Later the same evening, the House of Representatives approved 314-117 a compromise bill brokered by President Joe Biden and House Speaker Kevin McCarthy, just days before a deadline to address the debt ceiling or risk a U.S. government default.

The Fiscal Responsibility Act would avert a potential default that could send the U.S. economy into recession, reduce the nation's credit rating increasing its borrowing costs, and have worldwide economic and financial repercussions.

The bill suspends the nation's debt limit through Jan. 1, 2025, a date following the 2024 presidential election, permitting lawmakers to avoid a similar drama during an election season.

The bill would cap non-defense spending for one year with a slight increase the following year, as well as expand work requirements for some who receive food stamps, while also broadening some exemptions for vulnerable groups like veterans, people experiencing homelessness, and former foster youth. Provisions like work

requirements were a controversial aspect of the bill's negotiation.

In a discussion about looking at matters of government spending and public policy through the lens of what Jesus teaches in Matthew 25, the Rev. Jim Wallis, Chair in Faith and Justice for the McCourt School of Public Policy at Georgetown University, called the text "a test of faith."

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"It's a test of democracy for sure, and this is Jesus' final exam," he said, noting the text drew him to evangelical ministry because it was "radical."

"He's saying there, as you treat those who are poorest and most vulnerable, that's how much I know you love me," Wallis, who was also a spiritual adviser to former President Barack Obama, said.

Michael Strain, director of economic policy studies and the Arthur F. Burns scholar in political economy at the American Enterprise Institute, as well as author of "The American Dream Is Not Dead (But Populism Could Kill It)," said that part of what contributed to the political death of what was previously called "compassionate conservatism" was a rise of populism sparked in part by the 2008 financial crisis.

"The crisis began in 2008," Strain said. "It took until 2014 for the median wage to recover.

That's six years where half of workers had a lower wage than they had in 2007."

That populist impulse, Strain said, led to the rise of varied political figures, including elevating Sen. Bernie Sanders , I-Vt., a self-described socialist, as a Democratic presidential candidate, but also former Republican President Donald Trump.

"It kind of created a culture of anger, resentment and grievance, and a zero-sum mentality where different groups of Americans were really pitted against each other; as opposed to what we had before that, which was certainly not perfect, but which was a sense that we can all do better together going forward," Strain said.

Strain argued Washington often has more consensus than the public perceives, maintaining that even on issues like raising taxes, one side doesn't want to raise them at all, while the other only wants to raise them on a small portion of high-

earners.

Strain argued that "shared goals" are a good starting point for building consensus, and returning to less polarized political rhetoric.

"Oftentimes, debates in public life are a competition of half-truths," he said. "And oftentimes disagreement feels like disagreement in principle, but really it's disagreement in emphasis."