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Catholic Academics Challenge Boehner

by Michael Sean Winters

Distinctly Catholic

Breaking News.

UPDATE: More names have been added to the list of signatories below.

A group of prominent Catholic academics have signed a letter to Speaker of the House John Boehner, on the occasion of his forthcoming commencement address at the Catholic University of America. I will provide commentary later today, but the letter really speaks for itself, respectfully, clearly and in a way to challenge the Speaker to consider his policies. The letter will be delivered to Boehner's office personally by some of the signatories tomorrow morning.

[Editor's Note: Michael Sean Winter's first reaction is here: **Initial Thoughts on Letter to Boehner.**]

I will point out that the signatories do not call on Boehner to decline to give his address, nor on CUA to revoke its invitation, as many conservatives called on Notre Dame to revoke its invitation to President Obama in 2009. They understand that a university should be a place where all voices and viewpoints are heard. But, they are well within their right to ask Boehner to explain how his budgetary proposals do, or do not, conform to traditional Catholic social teaching. Here is the text of the letter:

Dear Mr. Speaker,

We congratulate you on the occasion of your commencement address to The Catholic University of America. It is good for Catholic universities to host and engage the thoughts of powerful public figures, even Catholics such as yourself who fail to recognize (whether out of a lack of awareness or dissent) important aspects of Catholic teaching. We write in the hope that this visit will reawaken your familiarity with the teachings of your Church on matters of faith and morals as they relate to governance.

Mr. Speaker, your voting record is at variance from one of the Church's most ancient moral teachings. From the apostles to the present, the Magisterium of the Church has insisted that those in power are morally obliged to preference the needs of the poor. Your record in support of legislation to address the desperate needs of the poor is among the worst in Congress. This fundamental concern should have great urgency for Catholic policy makers. Yet, even now, you work in opposition to it.

The 2012 budget you shepherded to passage in the House of Representatives guts long-established protections for the most vulnerable members of society. It is particularly cruel to pregnant women and children, gutting Maternal and Child Health grants and slashing \$500 million from the highly successful Women Infants and Children nutrition program. When they graduate from WIC at age 5, these children will face a 20% cut in food stamps. The House budget radically cuts Medicaid and effectively ends Medicare. It invokes the deficit to justify visiting such hardship upon the vulnerable, while it carves out \$3 trillion in new tax cuts for corporations and the wealthy. In a letter speaking on behalf of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, Bishop Stephen Blaire and Bishop Howard Hubbard detailed the anti-life implications of this budget in regard to its impact on poor and vulnerable American citizens. They explained the Church's teachings in this regard clearly, insisting that:

A just framework for future budgets cannot rely on disproportionate cuts in essential services to poor persons. It requires shared sacrifice by all, including raising adequate revenues, eliminating unnecessary military and other spending, and addressing the long-term costs of health insurance and retirement programs fairly.

Specifically, addressing your budget, the letter expressed grave concern about changes to Medicaid and Medicare that could leave the elderly and poor without adequate health care. The bishops warned further:

We also fear the human and social costs of substantial cuts to programs that serve families working to escape poverty, especially food and nutrition, child development and education, and affordable housing.

Representing the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, Bishops Hubbard and Blaire have now endorsed with other American Christian leaders a call to legislators for a "Circle of Protection" around programs for the poor that you, Mr. Speaker, have imperiled. The statement of these Christian leaders recognizes the need for fiscal responsibility, "but not at the expense of hungry and poor people." Indeed, it continues, "These choices are economic, political"and moral. As Christians, we believe the moral measure of the debate is how the most poor and vulnerable people fare. We look at every budget proposal from the bottom up"how it treats those Jesus called "the least of these" (Matthew 25:45)."

Mr. Speaker, we urge you to use the occasion of this year's commencement at The Catholic University of America to give fullest consideration to the teachings of your Church. We call upon you to join with your bishops and sign on to the "Circle of Protection." It is your moral duty as a legislator to put the needs of the poor and most vulnerable foremost in your considerations. To assist you in this regard, we enclose a copy of the Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church. Published by the Vatican, this is the "catechism" for the Church's ancient and growing teaching on a just society and Catholic obligations in public life.

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Catholic social doctrine is not merely a set of goals to be achieved by whatever means one chooses. It is also a way of proceeding, a set of principles that are derived from the truth of the human person. In Pope Benedict's words: "Without truth, charity degenerates into sentimentality. Love becomes an empty shell, to be filled in an arbitrary way... the word "love" is abused and distorted, to the point where it comes to mean the opposite."

We commend to you the Compendium's discussion of the principles of the common good, the preferential option for the poor, and the interrelationship of subsidiarity and solidarity. Paragraph 355 on tax revenues, solidarity, and support for the vulnerable is particularly relevant to the moment.

Be assured of our prayers for you on this occasion and for your faithful living out of your vocation in public life.

Sincerely,

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