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

# Faith leaders to Obama: protect the poor

Zoe Ryan | Jul. 21, 2011

As congress and the president take talks about the budget and deficit reduction to the final hour, there's one topic that is swept under the rug, religious leaders say: How will cuts in the budget affect the poor and vulnerable in the U.S.?

Leaders and representatives of faith organizations met with President Obama July 20 to discuss the ongoing budget and deficit talks. They urged the president not to forget to protect the poor and vulnerable in the budget talks.

"We're not interested in which party wins the current political battles but we are worried at who is likely to lose: the families trying to feed their kids, the jobless looking for work, children who needs healthcare, the hungry, sick and hopeless," Bishop Ricardo Ramirez of La Cruces, N.M., said in a conference call with other meeting attendees July 21. Ramirez is a member of the bishops' conference committee on domestic justice and human development.

The president and Congress must raise the country's debt limit by Aug. 2 or risk defaulting on that debt. To raise the ceiling the parties must reach a budget agreement, and Washington has seen deep divisions between some who want deep cuts in government spending and those who want to see increased revenues.

The president and Congress, when they understand the issues and see names and faces, don't want to make cuts to programs that support the poor and vulnerable, said Galen Carey, who represented the National Association of Evangelicals at the meeting. The problem is in the details, he said. Often times proposed cuts have results of which people are not aware.

When talking about cuts to the agriculture budget, for example, reductions could be achieved by reducing subsidies to wealthy farmers or by reducing the number of people receiving food stamps. People have to pay attention to the details on how the cuts are allocated, Carey warned.

The president seemed especially concerned about Medicaid and the reality that there are usually a second round of decisions made at the state level and in many states that results in a second round of cuts, said David Beckmann, president of Bread for the World. References to tax credits for the working poor and international development assistance were made in the meeting.

A quarter of the people in the United States attend religious services every week, Beckmann noted. If just 10 percent of those people contacted their member of Congress with the message to protect the poor, "there would be no risk to any poor person."

Leaders who met with the president are signatories to the Circle of Protection, a non-partisan movement that insists that poor and vulnerable people should be protected, not targeted in efforts to reduce long-term deficits, according to a statement by the bishops' conference.

The Circle of Protection statement has been endorsed by more than 60 heads of Christian denominations and religious organizations, as well as 45 heads of development agencies and other faiths, as part of the Circle of Protection movement, according to the bishops' statement.

"Poverty is taking a new face," said Rev. Stephen Thurston, head of the National Baptist Convention of America. A lot more people are on food stamps, especially professionals and military families, leaders said.

It's time to resolve the financial crisis not on the backs of the poor but sustaining the 25-year commitment that past budgets have had to exempting those programs from automatic triggers of reductions when there are financial crises, said Bishop Mark Hanson, presiding bishop of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America.

John Carr, executive director of the bishops' conference department of justice, peace and human development, used himself as an example, saying that he was in a comfortable living situation and the government doesn't ask him to sacrifice anything in this "terrible national crisis" yet the poor are being asked to give up fundamentals.

The religious leaders were interested in eight points to help the budget, including appropriate cuts, military spending, increased revenues and entitlement reform, Carr said.

Some have also met with Rep. Paul Ryan, which resulted in a "serious, constructive, substantive meeting," Carr said, although they don't have permission to repeat what any member of Congress or the president said in their meetings. The leaders also expressed interest in meeting with House Speaker John Boehner, Sen. Mitch McConnell and Sen. Harry Reid.

"However we put our fiscal house in order, we can't do it with more sacrifice from those who are already sacrificing and hurting so much," said Jim Wallis, president and CEO of Sojourners. "So we'd like to link our pulpits with the bully pulpit here and help the American people understand what's at stake and who's really going to be impacted by all of this."

You can find the Circle of Protection statement here: http://www.circleofprotection.us/ [1]

---

**Source URL (retrieved on *07/28/2016 - 12:52*):** https://www.ncronline.org/news/politics/faith-leaders-obama-protect-poor

**Links:**
[1] http://www.circleofprotection.us/