

Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (<https://www.ncronline.org>)

August 12, 2011 at 3:39pm

US fiscal and moral health imperiled

by NCR Editorial Staff

Watching the recent politically manufactured debt ceiling debate draw to its sad conclusion, one thinks of the last stanza of T.S. Eliot's often quoted poem, "The Hollow Men":

Not with a bang but a whimper.

However you cut it, there is something quite disturbing -- and immoral -- about a debt reduction package that calls for cuts in critical services to the poor while at the same time calling for no sacrifice from the wealthiest elite in our nation. This, of course, is one more sign, if any more were needed, of a well-heeled and finely purchased Congress by the superrich among us. It should be upsetting to all who support democracy around the world.

Those in Congress who justify this disproportionate solution to our nation's financial predicament under the banner of "no tax hikes" should be ashamed of themselves. However, don't expect any examination of conscience soon. These folks swim in waters of sweet justification and self-satisfaction, never inconvenienced by information or reason. Simple self-justifying ideology, fanned by those who most benefit from it, the superrich, propels them either mindlessly or blind to conscience.

After all, they apparently continue to look into the faces of their children without embarrassment.

Keep in mind the very modest tax increase that was initially on the table, the long-needed elimination of a tax break to the top 1 percent of the nation's already very well-off asset gatherers, was forced off by political reality before serious negotiations began to take place.

Elementary, if superficial, fairness would have required half the savings come from tax increases and half from spending cuts. But no, the starting point was to cut spending on programs that have modestly enabled the poorest among us to find food and shelter for their families during recent years as the gulf

between rich and poor has expanded at an alarming rate.

The median wealth of white households is now 20 times that of black households and 18 times that of Hispanic households, according to a Pew Research Center analysis of newly available government data from 2009. Twenty times!

The tax increase proposal that was forced from discussion by the Republican-controlled House of Representatives would have modestly raised only \$3 more from every \$1,000 among those comfortably over the \$250,000 mark. Fairness, real fairness, should have required 10 times that amount. But little that characterizes political discussions in Washington these days can be characterized by fairness, reason or simple human compassion.

So with cuts in spending on the proposed deficit reduction agreement bearing all weight, there is little wonder about how we got to this point. It is fact, not cliché, that those two wars President George W. Bush initiated -- as well as across-the-board tax cuts, by far the largest of these benefitting the most comfortable among us -- have caused much of the problem. An increasingly expensive, complex and inefficient insurance industry-controlled medical benefit program has played another major role.

By the way, those two wars? We have borrowed every dollar that funds them, passing on the costs to those who will now begin to feel an even greater pinch to their already insecure livelihoods, and, of course, to our children and their children.

Those who have actively encouraged our military engagements in Iraq and Afghanistan without also having lobbied for war-tax hikes are cheap patriots. Yes, cheap patriots. "Send in the troops," they have effectively said. "But don't ask me to open my wallet to help pay the price."

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Most reasonable people recognize that digging us out of the financial hole we are in will require common sacrifice. This is as it should be. Those with greater means, nearly all of whom have done very nicely in their financial investment portfolios during the last decade, should also bear the greater burden of these sacrifices. However, I'm not counting on it.

This would only be fair; it would express common purpose and our commitments to the common good, so much at the center of our church's teachings on the social contract and social justice.

To locate the foundations of Catholic social thought, go back to the beginnings and to its biblical origins. The evangelist Matthew wrote the following in chapter 25, and it is pertinent today:

"Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink? When did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? When did we see you ill or in prison, and visit you? And the king will say to them in reply, "Amen, I say to you, whatever you did for one of these least brothers of mine, you did for me." ?

Going forward, as we figure out the tough choices ahead, were we to keep our eyes focused on the "least" among us, we'll have a better chance of restoring fiscal -- and moral -- health to our nation.

After all, we're not a poor nation; just a seemingly soulless one.

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