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Catholic leaders focus on growing US poverty

by Jerry Filteau



Jon Proctor, who is among the millions of Americans who struggle below the poverty line, cleans after arriving home to Catholic Charities' Christ House in Alexandria, Va., Sept. 16. (CNS/Nancy Wiechec)

WASHINGTON -- Even as congressional Republicans prepared to slash funding for federal safety-net programs for the poor in the name of fiscal responsibility, U.S. Catholic leaders said the alarming number of Americans living in poverty demands a response that gives priority to the needs of the poor.

In an unusual letter to the U.S. bishops Sept. 15, New York Archbishop Timothy M. Dolan, president of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, called on bishops, priests and deacons across the country to preach at weekend Masses on poverty as an affront to justice and the God-given dignity of every man, woman and child.

The day before, Fr. Larry Snyder, Catholic Charities USA president, said the U.S. Census Bureau's new report that 46.2 million Americans were below the poverty level in 2010 "is further evidence that the United States of America needs comprehensive reform of the nation's service delivery system."

Catholic Charities USA, during its annual national conference of Catholic Charities agencies a few days later in Fort Worth, Texas, was chief host of a National Poverty Summit.

Involving government, business and charitable and social service leaders, the Sept. 18-19 summit was the first in what Catholic Charities USA intends to make an annual national gathering to "think and act anew" by designing "21st-century solutions for 21st-century poverty."

"Any [economic] recovery -- and strengthening of our society -- cannot overlook the least among us," Catholic Charities said in announcing the summit, which drew about 600 participants.

In his opening talk at the meeting Snyder quoted the words of Franklin Delano Roosevelt: "The test of our progress is not whether we add more to the abundance of those who have much; it is whether we provide enough for those who have too little."

Snyder called for government poverty relief programs to be more innovative and flexible, addressing the individual needs of those who are poor so that "the limited resources at our disposal can be focused to the precise area of need."

Other sponsors of the poverty summit were the American Human Development Project, the Corporation for Enterprise Development, the Coalition on Human Needs, Feeding America, the National Alliance to End Homelessness, Save the Children, and the Society of St. Vincent de Paul.

Dolan said that following the new Census Bureau report on more than 46 million Americans living in poverty, the U.S. bishops' Administrative Committee, which met in Washington Sept. 13-14, asked him to write a letter calling on preachers in the nation's Catholic pulpits to address the issue in their homilies.

In his letter Dolan asked the bishops and homilists in their dioceses to call attention to the fact that nearly one-sixth of all Americans and one in four U.S. children now live in poverty.

"These numbers are not statistics, but people suffering and wounded in their human dignity. They are parents who cannot feed their children, families that have lost their homes and jobless workers who have lost not only income, but also a sense of their place in society," he wrote.

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"The best way out of poverty is to work at a living wage," he added.

Quoting from Pope Benedict XVI's 2009 encyclical, *Caritas in Veritate* ("Charity in Truth"), Dolan said prolonged unemployment "undermines the freedom and creativity of the person and his family and social relationships, causing great psychological and spiritual suffering" and exacerbates a weakening of individual initiative and security as well as the common good.

In the current U.S. economy, he added, Hispanics and African Americans face particularly high levels of poverty and unemployment and "immigrant workers are especially vulnerable to exploitation and unfair treatment."

"They also contradict the consistent teaching of the church," he added. "Our Catholic tradition begins with respect for the life and dignity of all, requires a priority concern for the poor and vulnerable people."

Late this past July, Bishop Howard J. Hubbard of Albany, N.Y., chairman of the U.S. bishops' Committee on International Justice and Peace, and Ken Hackett, head of Catholic Relief Services, sharply criticized comparable cuts in U.S. foreign appropriations -- cuts that disproportionately affected U.S.

humanitarian programs designed to assist some of the poorest people in the world's poorest nations.

Another attack on Republican criteria for budget cuts at the expense of programs for the poor came from Faith in Public Life, an interreligious coalition claiming to seek social justice in today's political environment.

In a Sept. 20 statement addressed to the six Republican members of Congress on the Joint Select Committee on Deficit Reduction -- the so-called "supercommittee" on debt reduction -- Faith in Public Life urged an end to Bush-era tax breaks for the very rich as an integral part of the restoration of federal fiscal responsibility.

Members of the coalition asked the six Republican members of the committee to renounce their unanimous agreement to Washington business lobbyist Grover Norquist's pledge, widely publicized in Republican circles, not to reverse tax breaks for the very rich.

One of the coalition signers, Fr. Bill Pickard of Scranton, Pa., vice president of Northeastern Pennsylvania Pax Christi, said, "The current [tax] system as it stands is simply unjust."

"Refusal to raise revenue by implementing reasonable and necessary taxation on the most financially blessed people of our country is both bad policy and a moral outrage," he said. "We must embrace a fair, positive tax that puts common good over self-interest."

[Jerry Filteau is *NCR* Washington correspondent.]

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