

Inequality is a moral dilemma for Catholics

Mario T. García | Sep. 26, 2011 NCR Today

The Census Bureau reported that the rate of poverty in the United States has significantly increased in the last several years.

Last year 2.6 million people fell into poverty. Some 46.2 million people now live in poverty, the highest number since the bureau began reporting poverty levels 52 years ago.

At the same time, median household income fell by 6.4 percent since 2007.

I don't want to dwell on all these statistics; readers can easily research them. What I want to do is to reflect on what this means morally and ethically especially for American Catholics.

While the Bible tells us that the poor will always be with us, this doesn't mean that we should stand by and do nothing. Let's remember that Jesus was a poor man and that he ministered especially to the poor and oppressed.

The foundations of the Catholic church are found in the Jesus story and that is the story of a church that prioritizes the needs of the poor -- and not just from a spiritual level but also from a material one.

Today American Catholics as well as Americans in general face a profound challenge and that is to confront the growing inequality of wealth and power in this country.

This inequality where the top 1 percent of Americans possesses some 20 percent of the country's income is unacceptable from a moral and ethical perspective.

The debate in Washington over whether the needs of the poor and the beleaguered middle class should come before the needs of the very wealthy is not just a political or economic issue, but a moral one. To his credit, President Obama has now come out calling for a fairer distribution of wealth that includes tax measures whereby the very wealthy pay their fair share of taxes.

This is not only rational but also just.

Yet his Republican opponents say no and argue that it's not fair to tax those who create jobs, meaning the very wealthy and the huge corporate interests.

Yet this is not true.

In the 1950s, for example, the marginal tax rate for the very wealthy was about 90 percent and yet much economic progress characterized that decade and into the 1960s. Tax rates were then cut, and under President George W. Bush the tax rate for the very wealthy was then under 30 percent.

However, this lower tax rate, rather than fueling economic growth, brought us the Great Recession. It is simply not historically true that higher tax rates especially for the wealthy brings economic decline. If this were the

case, why isn't the current low tax rate for the wealthy bringing us economic prosperity now?

American Catholics need to support policies that are meant to bring about a more fair and just society. They need to do so not only for political and economic reasons, but because our faith calls for it.

It is difficult to believe Jesus would support an unfair tax system that prioritized the wealthy at the expense of the poor and those who are seeing their incomes decline every year.

The larger issues that we are confronting today are not just the specifics of the deficit, taxes, jobs, etc. The larger issues are the moral and ethical ones of whether we want a society that is fair and just to all including the distribution of wealth or a society with a small corporate elite hoarding much of the country's wealth and income.

But that question needs to be answered not politically, but morally.

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