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Catholic Democrats ask bishops to address poverty

by Tom Roberts

NCR Today

The following letter to Archbishop Timothy Dolan from Catholic Democrats was delivered to Baltimore Waterfront Marriott, where the Bishops' Fall General Assembly gathered from Monday to Wednesday.

November 14, 2011

Most Reverend Timothy M. Dolan
Archbishop of New York
c/o Baltimore Waterfront Marriott
700 Aliceanna Street
Baltimore, Maryland 21202

Dear Archbishop Dolan:

"The poor are getting poorer. The rich are getting richer. And the nation continues to pile up debt. But in the decade since American Catholic bishops issued their groundbreaking critique of the U.S. economy, what may be the most troubling new challenge facing the nation is the polarization that has put politics ahead of needy families and children, leaders of the nation's largest church said Tuesday," the Associated Press reported in 1995 during the bishops' annual November conference. The headline was "Bishops condemn budget politics, widening gap between rich, poor." Another headline for the same AP article read, "Bishops urge government to do more for the poor: Catholic leaders say polarization puts politics ahead of aiding the needy."

We are writing to you on behalf of the thousands of members across the country in Catholic Democrats, an advocacy organization whose mission is to advance the rich Catholic Social Justice Tradition in the public square and within the Democratic Party. Today we are writing you first and foremost as Catholics

who are seeking to help address the daunting moral economic challenges of our time. We are concerned that in a time of critical and contentious national debate on the economy -- the outcome of which will impact the lives of millions of Americans and poor people around the world well into the future -- our Church has lost its voice as an unambiguous advocate for the poor.

Today, as in 1995, our nation faces political partisanship when solidarity is needed. The bishops, who were so united then in solidarity with the downtrodden, appear now to be tentative at best. At a time when the institutional Church is seeking to regain its moral voice and the nation is looking for moral economic leadership, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) has chosen not to include the issue of poverty on its Fall General Assembly meeting agenda this week and instead is holding an open session on "religious liberty." This is at least the third meeting in a row where the institutional Church has failed to address issues connected to poverty and income inequality. In doing so, we believe that the Church is losing its moral voice at a time when our nation sorely needs the kind of moral leadership that the Catholic Church is uniquely qualified to provide. Rather than being an advocate for others who are urgently in need, it appears as if the USCCB leadership has chosen to conflate a number of unrelated issues under the rubric of "religious liberty," which may well prove to be self defeating for the interests of the Church. The result has been that the de facto moral voices that have emerged in the public square on these issues have come from the secular sphere, including Warren Buffet and the Occupy Wall Street Movement.

The application of the Catholic Social Justice Tradition prudentially unites faith and reason to help build a more just world. It has inspired the intellectual underpinnings and the imperative for social action, helped guide our national conscience, and strengthened our nation's secular appreciation of social justice in the fruition of the American Experiment. The Catholic Social Justice Tradition has guided Americans' understanding of and service to "the general welfare" -- indeed the common good.

For more than a century, Catholic ideals of social justice have inspired -- and been a true compass for -- our long progress as a nation toward a more just civil society, including:

- Pope Leo XIII, whose 1891 encyclical *On the Condition of Labor* eloquently defended the rights and the dignity of workers and helped nascent labor movements in many countries;
- The "labor priests" of the mid 20th century, including Msgr. John Ryan, who advised President Franklin Delano Roosevelt and helped win the support of Catholics for FDR's New Deal programs that helped millions of Americans;
- Dorothy Day, founder of the Catholic Worker Movement, whose tireless efforts helped bring an understanding of the plight of migrant workers to Americans of all faiths;
- Msgr. Geno Baroni, the "Godfather" of the Catholic Campaign for Human Development, who robustly advanced community organizing for social action in the 1960's and 1970's;
- The National Conference of Catholic Bishops who brought longstanding principles of the Catholic Social Justice Tradition to the U.S. national economic debate in the Reagan Era with the issuance of the pastoral letter *Economic Justice for All*. The bishops updated these principles during the welfare reform debate that took place in the Clinton administration with *A Decade After Economic Justice for All* and developed a 668 word letter that was used as handout for Catholics called *A Catholic Framework for Economic Life*;
- Pope Benedict XVI, whose 2009 encyclical *Charity in Truth* summoned our economic and political systems to serve the needs of all people, and most recently;
- The Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace who recently called on the nations of the world to forgo some national economic autonomy in establishing a global economic authority to mitigate the hazards of international finance and to help alleviate wealth disparity.

Last Thursday, a prominent Catholic archbishop spoke at Assumption College in Worcester, Massachusetts on the topic of religious liberty. At the end of his presentation, he was asked why the U.S. bishops were not discussing the issue of poverty at the annual meeting this week. Beyond conveying that it was not on the agenda, his response included the candid statement that the bishops are not experts on the economy and that the bishops probably shouldn't have adopted a statement such as *Economic Justice for All*. It should be noted that the committee that drafted *Economic Justice for All* spent four years in consultation with more than 100 economic and social experts before issuing its final draft. Furthermore, our political leaders are also not experts on the economy and yet make decisions on the moral document called the U.S. Budget. Given the well grounded theological principles that *Economic Justice for All* is based on, his response raises many questions, including:

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- Why is the issue of poverty not on the agenda for the meeting?
- Should lay Catholics expect the U.S. bishops collectively, as teachers of our faith, to adhere to the same obligation that we are reminded of so often - to not pick and choose what we believe?
- If the U.S. bishops cannot speak out on economic issues, then how do the U.S. bishops view Vatican statements on the economy?
- How should lay Catholics view Vatican statements on the economy if the U.S. bishops cannot support *Economic Justice for All* today -- a document that bases its principles on Biblical citations, theological principles in the documents of the Second Vatican Council, and the papal encyclicals of Pope John XXIII, Pope Paul VI, and Pope John Paul II, among others?

As Catholics, we know that nothing animates the imagination of Catholic identity as much as helping the poor. Catholics are proud of the good work of Catholic Charities, the Catholic healthcare system, Catholic education, Catholic Relief Services, and the Migration and Refugee Services. A recent survey of American Catholics published by the *National Catholic Reporter* -- the fifth in a longitudinal series of surveys by William D'Antonio of the Catholic University of America and others -- shows that one of the most important aspects of a Catholic's identity is helping the poor. It has ranked along with, or just below, the divinity of Christ and above every other aspect of our faith, including our devotion to Mary and the Sacraments. Helping the poor is in the Catholic DNA and guides Catholics in "What Would Jesus Do" moments.

Between the issuance of *Economic Justice for All* in 1986 and *A Decade After Economic Justice for All* in 1995, the economy improved significantly. Still, the bishops' conference found it important to address the economic issues in their 1986 pastoral letter again in 1995 and 1996. Today, the economy is dramatically worse than it was in 1986 or 1995 and 1996, and many expect that a recovery to 2007 economic levels will take years, prolonging years of hardship for the poor and working families. The attachment to this letter includes a section comparing current economic conditions to those in 1996, the last time the bishops reasserted the economic principles of *Economic Justice for All* and at a time they were opposing national welfare reform. It shows, as the AP reported in 1996, that "the poor are getting poorer ... the rich are getting richer." Most important is the fact that children are being hurt the most: almost 1 in 4 children live in poverty today and all children and adolescents comprise about 35% of those living in poverty, while comprising only 25% of the population.

In 2010, Republicans won a major victory, took over leadership of the U.S. House of Representatives and cut the Democratic majority in the Senate. The major campaign issues were jobs and the economy. Virtually all Catholic Republicans signed the Grover Norquist-led Americans for Tax Reform pledge of

no new taxes, including not eliminating tax expenditures (loopholes) that benefit our nation's largest corporations. Tea Party members took effective control of Congress and sought to advance their agenda of downsizing government. In 2011, U.S. Representative Paul Ryan (R-WI) introduced a budget that would make deep cuts in federal programs that help the poor, including the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP or food stamps) and the Women and Infant Children nutrition (WIC) programs. It is estimated that almost 2/3 of the budget cuts in the Ryan Budget come from programs helping low-income families.

In April, Representative Ryan wrote a letter to you arguing how his budget conforms to Catholic Social Teaching, asserting that:

- his budget is "consistent with the preferential option for the poor, providing more support for low income groups and the sick;"
- the principle of subsidiarity is "the same purpose" as federalism in political terms;
- the "Social Assistance State" that Pope John Paul II warned against is now being realized in the United States and is a threat to human dignity.

Your response to Representative Ryan's letter left lay readers -- as well as informed Catholic observers -- to reach varying conclusions of the meaning of your response. We are concerned that your charitable response has been open to contradictory interpretations. We believe that the Ryan Budget is one that represents -- as described by the Pontifical Council on Justice and Peace -- "an economic liberalism [economic conservatism in U.S. political language] that spurns rules and controls" and "that purports to derive [economic] laws for how [capitalistic] markets function from theory ... while exaggerating certain aspects of markets" and "without measuring them against reality." Such an economic theology was repudiated by the Pontifical Council in its most recent statement on the global economy. Representative Ryan has posted your letter on the U.S. House Committee on the Budget Web site as a sign of support from you -- and by extension from the U.S. bishops -- and as an indication that the "Ryan Budget" is in conformance with Catholic Social Teaching.

We would like to address several points he made from the practical application of Catholic Social Teaching in that letter and ask you to clarify your response to Representative Ryan in light of the Catholic Social Justice Tradition and the 1986 pastoral letter, *Economic Justice for All*, which reminds us that, "The poor have the single most urgent economic claim on the conscience of the nation".

First, a group of Catholic theologians and scholars criticized Speaker of the U.S. House John Boehner (R-OH) for his support of the Ryan Budget in a letter sent to him on May 11, 2011, saying that it "guts long established protections for the most vulnerable members of society." Similarly, Bishop Stephen Blaire (Diocese of Stockton) and Bishop Howard Hubbard (Diocese of Albany) -- who have addressed effectively federal budget matters for the USCCB in their roles as Chairman of the Committee on Domestic Justice and Human Development and Chairman of the Committee on International Justice and Peace respectively -- took exception to the Ryan Budget. In a letter to the U. S. Senate dated May 5, 2011, Bishops Blaire and Hubbard wrote, "We also are deeply concerned about 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 programs." They also express concern for the 33% cut in foreign aid, saying, "We ask the Senate to support poverty-focused assistance and to continue reform of foreign assistance so it is even more effective for the poorest people in the poorest places on earth."

Second, Representative Ryan uses his "federalism" assertion to justify converting Medicaid funding into block grants from the federal government to the states. Such a proposal would very likely result in a loss

of health care coverage to the poor. Thus, we believe it contradicts a requirement for invoking the principle of subsidiarity because the needs of the poor would not be met and likely be made worse. Again, in their May 5th letter, Bishops Blaire and Hubbard seem to agree, saying, "Cost cutting proposals should not simply shift health care costs from the federal government to the states or directly to beneficiaries. Such measures could leave more elderly, working families and poor people without the assurance of adequate and affordable health care."

Third, Representative Ryan's assertion that the "Social Assistance State," which Pope John Paul II cautioned against in *The Hundredth Year*, is being realized in the United States and is a threat to human dignity raises this question: if the U.S. is a social assistance state, then what Western industrialized countries are not? An examination of data provided by the Organization of Economic Co-operation and Development refutes this assessment of the U.S. in relation to the global community. The U.S. ranked 33rd out of 34 on total federal tax revenues as a percentage of GDP (50% less than the OECD average) and 32nd out of 39 on welfare payments (46% less than the OECD average). Also, the U.S. ranked 1st out of 39 on the percentage of public spending on family benefits through the tax system, which presumably includes the Earned Income Tax Credit (which economists believe provides an incentive for individuals to work), a program that has long been supported by the U.S. bishops and was implemented by a Republican president.

In his 1963 papal encyclical *Peace on Earth*, Pope John XXIII said, "The attainment of the common good is the sole reason for the existence of civil authorities." In *Economic Justice for All*, the U.S. bishops described the application of this to our economic system as follows, "Every perspective on economic life that is human, moral and Christian must be shaped by three questions: What does the economy do for people? What does it do to people? And how do people participate in it?" Pope John Paul II warned of a risk of the "idolatry of the market" that was echoed most recently by the Vatican in the statement of the Pontifical Council for Justice Peace on the global economy.

A robust examination of moral economic issues -- and the effect of the decisions we make today as a nation -- has been lacking in our public debate on our national budget. As you have reminded us, the budget is as much of a moral document as an economic one -- particularly for children today and generations to come. With the economic challenges we face as a nation and in the global community, we believe that the guiding light of justice provides the best path in our pursuit of the common good. But to do so, we also believe that people of good will want -- and need -- to better know how the common good serves all of us and how we are connected as a human family. The U.S. bishops can help provide that understanding.

In this letter, we have asked you several questions and asked you to clarify your response to Representative Ryan in light of *Economic Justice for All*. As Catholics, on the 25th anniversary of *Economic Justice for All*, we are urging you and all of your brother bishops:

1. To contact your Federal and State Senators and Representatives to urge them to protect funding for programs that serve the poor and to include reasonable tax increases for the wealthiest Americans as a means to balance federal and state budgets before cutting expenditures that will hurt those most in need.
2. To use the weight of your office as spiritual leaders to speak out in support of the poor and for the right of every person to fully participate in society, including the right to work.
3. To urge priests in every Catholic parish in the country during this Advent to give a homily on the role of the Church in being an unambiguous advocate for the poor, including funding for programs that serve those most in need. Remind them that in 1986, the Maryland bishops did this in the hope

of providing a national model to engage Catholics in the social justice teachings of the Church.

We hope that the questions and requests that we have brought to you will help advance a more informed debate on the moral document of the national budget, in serving those most in need and particularly the poor and children living in poverty, and in advancing the common good. While we think it is unfortunate that the bishops have yet to speak collectively on poverty and income inequality, we believe there is still time for you to use your voices to address this most pressing issue of our time. We are grateful for the rich Catholic Social Justice Tradition, to which our baptism commits us. We thank you and your brother bishops for your service to the Church, and look forward to your reply.

In the peace of Christ,

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