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Advocates gear up to protect poor

Zoe Ryan | Mar. 14, 2012

Geraldo de Jesus, right, gets a hand from volunteer Nancy Perez with his food selection at the Sister Regis Food Cupboard in Rochester, N.Y., Oct. 3. (CNS/Mike Crupi)

A year ago as a national debate raged over federal deficits and budgets, 50 lay and ordained leaders from a wide representation of Christian traditions threw up a ?Circle of Protection? around government programs that they said ?meet the essential needs of hungry and poor people at home and abroad.?

?As Christian leaders, we are committed to fiscal responsibility and shared sacrifice,? wrote the leaders, who include Catholic, Lutheran and Methodist bishops, men and women religious, mainline Protestants, African Americans and Latinos. ?We are also committed to resist budget cuts that undermine the lives, dignity, and rights of poor and vulnerable people,? they wrote in a statement of principles.

The Circle of Protection?s unified front saved government poverty programs as debate over the federal budget and deficits turned into a bruising political street fight last summer, according to the Rev. Gary Cook, government relations director for the hunger relief organization Bread for the World, a Circle of Protection signatory organization.

In August, Congress passed the Budget Control Act, which raised the nation?s debt ceiling in exchange for caps on discretionary spending accounts. Exempted from cuts were many programs that serve low-income people, such as Medicaid, Supplemental Security Income, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, and the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, or SNAP, formerly known as food stamps.

The year ended, Cook said, ?in much better shape than we thought we might be at the beginning of the year.?

As this election year unfolds and budget priorities become debating points, members of the Circle of Protection have the same message as last year for the president and Congress: Don?t balance the budget on the backs of the poor and vulnerable.

President Barack Obama released his $3.8 trillion budget proposal to Congress for the fiscal year 2013 on Feb. 13. Obama?s budget makes most of its cuts in defense spending ($500 million decrease from his proposal last year), and has about $1.6 trillion in tax increases.

The U.S. Catholic bishops sent a letter March 6 to the House and Senate as elected officials began this year?s budget process.

?Our nation has an obligation to address the impact of future deficits on the health of the economy, to ensure stability and security for future generations, and to use limited resources efficiently and effectively,? said the letter signed by Bishop Stephen Blaire of Stockton, Calif., and Bishop Richard Pates of Des Moines, Iowa. Blaire is chairman of the bishops? Committee on Domestic Justice and Human Development, and Pates is chairman of the Committee on International Justice and Peace.

?A just framework for future budgets cannot rely on disproportionate cuts in essential services to poor persons; it requires shared sacrifice by all, including raising adequate revenues, eliminating unnecessary military and other spending, and addressing the long-term costs of health insurance and retirement programs fairly.?

Last year, activists played a great role in protecting low-income programs, said Ben D?Avanzo, an analyst at Bread for the World. With so much at stake across every single constituency, a similar -- if not stronger -- effort will be needed this year to protect low-income programs, he said.

The Catholic bishops? message on the budget for this year is consistent with years past, said Kathy Saile, director of Domestic Social Development for the U.S. bishops? conference.

The bishops? March 6 letter offers three criteria to guide budget decisions:

- Every budget decision should be assessed by whether it protects or threatens human life and dignity;
- The central moral measure of any budget is how it affects the least of these;
- The government and other institutions have a shared responsibility to promote the common good of all.

Expanding on the last point, Saile said, ?It?s not that the government is the only one that has to take care of the poor -- we?re all called to do that.? It is a shared responsibility, she said, among groups such as the government, private sector, individuals, charities and churches.

The bishops? March 6 letter said they support proposals in Obama?s budget that strengthen programs that serve poor and vulnerable people, such as Pell Grants and improved workforce training and development, and that restore cuts to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, as well as efforts to make permanent recent expansions of low-income tax credits, such as the Child Tax Credit and Earned Income Tax Credit. These are programs the bishops have long supported, Saile said.

The president?s proposal to increase the minimum amount of rent that can be charged to families receiving housing assistance is not something the bishops support, the letter states. Neither is the proposal to eliminate funding for the DC Opportunity Scholarship Program, a private school voucher program in Washington.

The bishops also are ?very concerned with proposals to eliminate the ?firewall? that currently exists between

defense and nondefense spending,? the letter states. ?Elimination of this firewall would mean that poverty-related domestic and international programs would compete with other more powerful interests and less essential priorities.

?Likewise, reverting to a ?security/non-security? distinction for Fiscal Year 2013 would threaten international development assistance.?

The bishops have not analyzed any budget suggestion offered by the different Republican presidential candidates because there is no nominee, and the bishops aren?t going to weigh in on the election, Saile said.

But she said that it is important to look at budget proposals from politicians and policymakers at all governmental levels, local, state and federal, and apply the bishops? three criteria to each proposal.

Bread for the World has a letter-writing campaign going on called the ?Offering of Letters.? Leaders of congregations who are Bread for the World members will focus on one of four topics when writing letters to their representatives in Congress: domestic nutrition, poverty-focused foreign assistance, tax credits for low-income families, and international food aid programs.

Cook said that Lent last year was the genesis of the Circle of Protection, which was appropriate because Lent is a time for people to think about the implications of the budget on the poor and to focus their prayer and fasting on those issues.

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