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Protesters, critics greet Rep. Ryan at Georgetown

by Michael Sean Winters by Brian Roewe

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Manuel Padilla, as GOP Jesus, reads the 'Me' Attitudes, a farcical take on the Beatitudes during the April 26 protest of Rep. Paul Ryan's budget proposal at Georgetown University. (Photos by Elo"sa PÈrez-Lozano)

WASHINGTON -- Days after receiving a letter signed by 90-plus faculty and administrators rebuking his interpretation of Catholic social teaching, Rep. Paul Ryan (R-Wis.) stepped onto the Georgetown University campus Thursday amid critics of the federal budget he proposed, the House of Representatives has approved and presidential candidate Mitt Romney has endorsed.

The letter from the Jesuit-run university's scholars followed a series of letters from the U.S. bishops to four committees in the House, where the Ryan budget passed March 29. In their four letters, the bishops voiced their disapproval of the 2013 GOP budget, calling for a 'circle of protection' around programs for the poor and vulnerable.

'Our problem with Representative Ryan is that he claims his budget is based on Catholic social teaching,' said Jesuit Fr. Thomas J. Reese, one of the Georgetown letter's organizers. 'This is nonsense. As scholars, we want to join the Catholic bishops in pointing out that his budget has a devastating impact on programs for the poor.'

On hand to deliver the Whittington Lecture for Georgetown's Public Policy Institute, the Wisconsin congressman addressed the scholars' letter early on in his talk, thanking the signers for it and calling for charitable conversation. He did not concede to their criticism that his budget unfairly hurts the poor and most vulnerable, implying instead that Catholic social teaching can have multiple interpretations.

"I suppose there are some Catholics who for a long time have thought they had a monopoly of sorts... not exactly on heaven, but on the social teaching of our Church," he said to the sparse crowd inside Gaston Hall, explaining that his role as a public servant led him to apply Catholic social thought in ways that might differ from other approaches.

In his speech titled "America's Enduring Promise," Ryan spoke of subsidiarity and solidarity, Pope Benedict XVI's position on debt, and prudential judgment, at one time echoing the words of his spokesman Kevin Seifert from days earlier when the congressman said, "A preferential option for the poor does not mean a preferential option for big government."

Although the question-and-answer session of the lecture had been previously determined, protesters inside and outside the hall made sure their voices were heard. Midway through Ryan's talk, a group of students carried into the vacant balcony a banner that read: "Stop the war on the poor. No social justice in Ryan's budget."

Outside, protesters made of Georgetown students and faculty and faith-based groups, including Catholics United, unveiled a separate, 50-foot banner reading, "Were you there when they crucified the poor?"

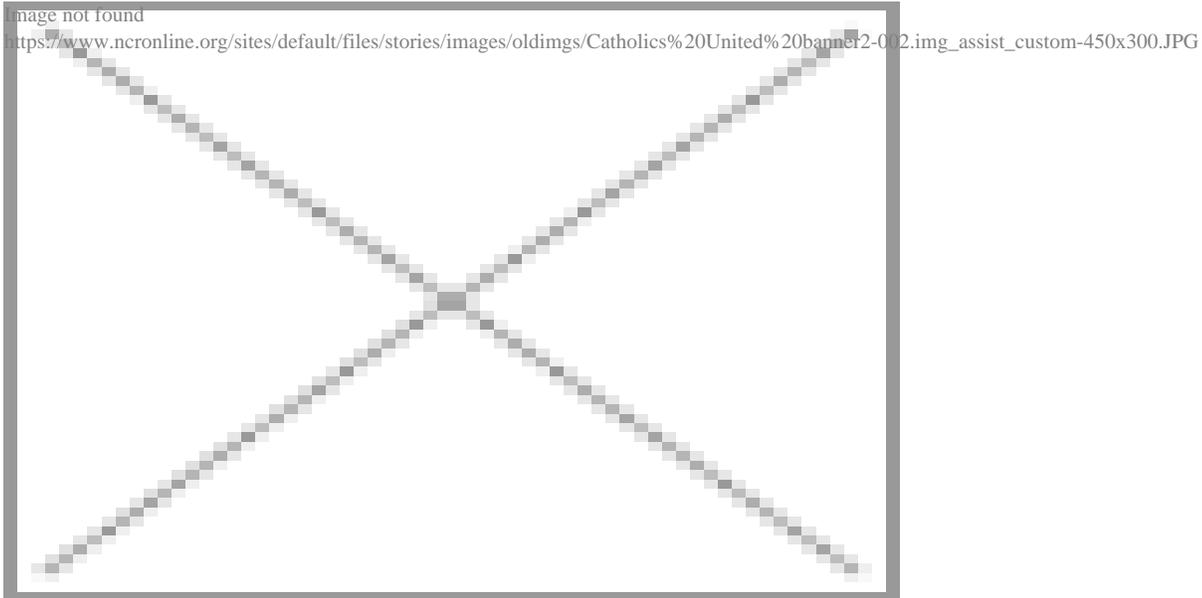
In their letter, the Georgetown scholars said they would be remiss in their duties to Ryan and their students if they did not challenge the House budget committee chairman's "continuing misuse of Catholic teaching to defend a budget plan that decimates food programs for struggling families, radically weakens protections for the elderly and sick, and gives more tax breaks to the wealthiest few."

In late March, Ryan proposed a federal budget for 2013 aimed at lowering the national deficit through major spending cuts to social programs. In a March 20 op-ed piece for *The Wall Street Journal* introducing a budget that "delivers real spending discipline," Ryan said the discipline wouldn't come from cuts in military spending, "but by ending the epidemic of crony politics and government overreach that has weakened confidence in the nation's institutions and its economy.

"And it strengthens the safety net by returning power to the states, which are in the best position to tailor assistance to their specific populations," he wrote.

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The proposed budget includes \$5.3 trillion in non-defense budget cuts over the next decade, with 62 percent of the cuts coming from programs assisting people of low incomes, according to the Center on Budget and Priority Policies. The center estimates, conservatively by their own regard, the Ryan budget would see cuts of \$2.4 trillion to Medicaid and other low-income health care; \$134 billion to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP); at least \$463 billion to mandatory low-income programs; and at least \$291 billion to low-income discretionary programs.



In justifying the cuts, Ryan said they were based in his Catholic faith and Catholic social teaching, telling Christian Broadcasting Network "a person's faith is central to how they conduct themselves in public and in private. So to me, using my Catholic faith, we call it the social magisterium, which is how do you apply the doctrine of your teaching into your everyday life as a layperson?"

Critics, including those at Georgetown, believed Ryan missed the mark in his application of Catholic teachings to his budget.

"In short, your budget appears to reflect the values of your favorite philosopher, Ayn Rand, rather than the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Her call to selfishness and her antagonism toward religion are antithetical to the Gospel values of compassion and love," the Georgetown scholars stated.

"Survival of the fittest may be OK for Social Darwinists but not for followers of the gospel of compassion and love," Reese said.

The Georgetown scholars, who included with their letter a copy of "The Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church," further refuted Ryan's take on the church's teaching on subsidiarity, which says "a community of a higher order should not interfere in the internal life of a community of a lower order, depriving the latter of its functions, but rather should support it in case of need and help to coordinate its activity with the activities of the rest of society, always with a view to the common good."

Speaking on the Christian Broadcasting Network, Ryan said, "To me, the [Catholic] principle of subsidiarity, which is really federalism, meaning government closest to the people governs best, having a civil society of the principle of solidarity where we, through our civic organizations, through our churches, through our charities, through all of our different groups where we interact with people as a community, that's how we advance the common good."

"Subsidiarity is not a free pass to dismantle government programs and abandon the poor to their own devices. This often misused Catholic principle cuts both ways," the letter states.

"It calls for solutions to be enacted as close to the level of local communities as possible. But it also demands that higher levels of government provide help -- "subsidiary" -- when communities and local governments face problems beyond their means to address such as economic crises, high unemployment, endemic poverty and hunger."

Ryan attempted to clarify his interpretation of subsidiarity during his speech today and through an op-ed piece in the *National Catholic Register*, linking subsidiarity to the idea of solidarity -- a connection he did not make in earlier comments and that critics quickly attacked.

The Georgetown scholars' response to Ryan's budget followed a series of letters sent to House committees in previous weeks. In four letters to four House committees, the bishops called for the creation of a "circle of protection" around poor and vulnerable people and the programs serving to meet their basic needs, and voiced their opposition to measures reducing resources provided to such safety net programs.

Heading the effort were Bishops Stephen E. Blaire of Stockton, Calif., and Richard E. Pates of Des Moines, Iowa, chairmen of the Committees on Domestic Justice and Human Development and on International Justice and Peace respectively.

"Congress faces a difficult task to balance needs and resources and allocate burdens and sacrifices. Just solutions, however, must require shared sacrifice by all, including raising adequate revenues, eliminating unnecessary military and other spending, and fairly addressing the long-term costs of health insurance and retirement programs. The House-passed budget resolution fails to meet these moral criteria," Blaire wrote in an April 16 letter to the House Committee on Agriculture.

Ryan attempted to minimize the criticism, saying in an April 19 Fox News appearance that Blaire did not speak for all bishops and "we respectfully disagree." The bishops' conference quickly clarified that USCCB committee chairs represent their fellow bishops who elected them into the leadership positions.

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