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When the budget is a moral failure, who will speak for the poor?

by Tom Gallagher



Georgetown University students protest while Rep. Paul Ryan speaks April 26 at the university in Washington. (CNS)

Commentary

The House of Representatives has passed a budget based largely on a plan proposed in late March by Congressman Paul Ryan, R-Wis., a practicing Catholic and later endorsed by presumed-Republican presidential candidate Mitt Romney. The plan is structured to spare military spending from mandatory cuts. It is a vicious, anti-life austerity budget that, if implemented, would hammer the poor, the sick, the vulnerable and elderly.

Not surprisingly, the U.S. bishops have concluded that Ryan's budget proposal was a "moral failure" and communicated this in a calm, courteous, respectful but clear manner to Congress.

Bishop Stephen Blaire of Stockton, Calif. Diocese, and Chairman of the Committee on Domestic Justice

and Human Development, and Bishop Richard Pates of Des Moines, and Chairman, Committee on International Justice and Peace, presented Congress several letters with moral criteria to guide the difficult federal budgetary process. The last letter went to Congressional leaders May 8.

Blaire called upon House members to "ensure all policies meet the moral criteria established by the Catholic bishops of the United States to create a circle of protection around programs that serve poor and vulnerable people and communities."

"The needs of those who are hungry and homeless, without work or in poverty should come first. Government and other institutions have a shared responsibility to promote the common good of all, especially ordinary workers and families who struggle to live in dignity in difficult economic times," the letter said.

Blaire wrote that the 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."

NCR recently editorialize on the Ryan budget focusing on the fundamental theme of Eucharistic consistency:

The U.S. bishops' teaching document, "Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship," points out that "no party and too few candidates fully share the Church's comprehensive commitment to the life and dignity of every human being from conception to natural death." We agree. Nonetheless, "Faithful Citizenship" does offer a fundamental orientation that all Catholics, including elected officials, must take toward legislation, including federal spending.

"Faithful Citizenship," quoting Pope Benedict XVI, calls the Eucharist the "sacrament of charity" and urges us to adopt a "Eucharistic form of life" with "Eucharistic consistency." It is the Eucharist that is at the center of Catholic social teaching. It is precisely the Eucharist that impels Catholics to go out and serve the poor, the needy, the vulnerable and the elderly.

You can read the *NCR* editorial here.

We were then subject to Rep. Ryan's hilarious claim that his budget was grounded in Catholic social teaching. At first, Ryan's claims were shocking to those with a clear understanding and appreciation of Catholic social teaching. His claim was eviscerated by theologians and academics. (See: **Protesters, critics greet Rep. Ryan at Georgetown.**)

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Rep. Ryan continues to claim that Catholic social teaching is the foundational source or orientation point for his dastardly budget.

So I looked up Rep. Ryan's congressional district in Wisconsin and to determine whether it was within the Milwaukee archdiocese's jurisdiction or within the jurisdiction of the Madison diocese. I emailed the Offices of Communication for both dioceses and asked for a clarification.

I wanted to see whether Archbishop Jerome Listecky of Milwaukee or Bishop Robert Morlino of Madison have publicly reached out to Rep. Ryan to discuss his "moral failure" of a federal budget proposal and his acute misunderstanding of Catholic social teaching.

What I found was both interesting and distressing.

Julie Wolf, communications director for Milwaukee, immediately responded to my email inquiry and said that "yes," Rep. Ryan's district overlaps with the archdiocese, but that she didn't know exactly the precise boundaries. I asked for an interview, but she was tied up most of the day and asked if I could send along some questions and she'd get back to me later in the day or the next day. This was more than a sufficient response, and understandable. I said I would send along some questions.

I sent the same email to Brent King, Madison diocese's communications director. He confirmed that Rep. Ryan's district overlaps with the diocese's boundaries.

I sent the following questions to Ms. Wolf and Mr. King.

1. Bishop Stephen Blaire of Stockton, Calif., Diocese, and Chairman of the Committee on Domestic Justice and Human Development, and Bishop Richard Pates of Des Moines, and Chairman, Committee on International Justice and Peace, presented Congress letters with moral criteria to guide the difficult federal budgetary process. About three weeks later, Catholic Republican Congressman Paul Ryan released his budget and the U.S. House of Representatives passed this budget on a party line vote. Subsequently, these bishops sent letters to Congress calling the Ryan Budget a "moral failure." I have not found any public statement from [Archbishop Listecky/Bishop Morlino] about Rep. Ryan's moral failure.

Q. Has [Archbishop Listecky/Bishop Morlino] issued a public statement about Rep. Ryan's budget?

Q. If no, has [Archbishop Listecky/Bishop Morlino] written or called Congressman Ryan privately to discuss his moral failure?

2. Congressman Ryan has claimed that "Catholic social teaching" has formed his decision-making regarding his budget. Rep. Ryan has shown a complete misunderstanding of Catholic social teaching.

Q. Given this acute misunderstanding of his Catholic faith that could have disastrous ramifications on the poor and middle class, doesn't [Archbishop Listecky/Bishop Morlino] have an immediate and urgent need to educate and correct Rep. Ryan?

Q. Since Rep. Ryan continues to argue that he is interpreting Catholic social teaching correctly, doesn't this create scandal in the church that a major political figure, who some say may be the Vice President running mate of presumptive Republican presidential nominee Governor Mitt Romney?

The U.S. bishops' teaching document, Faithful Citizenship, quotes Pope Benedict XVI, who calls for Catholics to live lives with Eucharistic consistency. Has [Archbishop Listecky/Bishop Morlino] written or spoken publicly about how Rep. Ryan and his budget proposal lack Eucharistic consistency and reflect hostility to the poor, the vulnerable and the elderly?

3. Have we come to a moment in time in which Catholic Republican elected officials, such as Rep. Ryan, who propose and pursue anti-life budget legislation, so violative of human dignity, should be banned from speaking at Catholic institutions and receiving honors, say, in the [Archdiocese of Milwaukee/Diocese of

Madison]?

4. Are there any plans for the [Archdiocese of Milwaukee/Diocese of Madison] and the Wisconsin State Catholic Conference to organize protests and letter writing campaigns against Rep. Ryan and his budget proposal?

Response from the Archdiocese of Milwaukee

Instead of hearing back from Ms. Wolf, I heard from Jerry Topczewski, who it turns out is a seasoned public relations executive and chief of staff for Archbishop ListECKI. He offered this response:

?Archbishop ListECKI has not made any public statements that I am aware of regarding the budget proposal nor, to my knowledge, has he spoken to Congressman Ryan regarding the budget proposal. Although a portion of Congressman Ryan's congressional district overlaps the Archdiocese of Milwaukee, Congressman Ryan lives in the Diocese of Madison. Recently, Cardinal Timothy M. Dolan, president of the USCCB, made some comments regarding the budget proposal in a response to a reporter's question. You may want to review his comments.?

I followed up with this email question:

Is it accurate to conclude then that Archbishop ListECKI plans no formal engagement with Rep. Ryan with respect to the Congressman's "understanding" of Catholic social teaching and Rep. Ryan's budget proposal?

Mr. Topczewski: ?No.?

My next follow-up email question:

So going forward, will Archbishop ListECKI publicly engage Rep. Ryan about his 'understanding' of Catholic social teaching and its application to the federal budget?

Mr. Topczewski: ?I haven't asked him.?

My next email question:

Will you kindly present my questions to Archbishop ListECKI and ask him to respond to the questions?

Mr. Topczewski: ?It is Confirmation season, so the Archbishop's schedule is very busy. If I get the chance to ask him, I will let you know.?

I asked if I could have responses by this past Friday so I could file this story, but I have not heard back. If Mr. Topczewski responds to these questions, I will be sure to give him and Archbishop ListECKI plenty of space.

Response from the Diocese of Madison

Unbeknownst to me, another writer for National Catholic Reporter, Maria Rohde, was on assignment to file a story covering a serious conflict at a rural parish in the Diocese of Madison between the priests, parishioners and Bishop Morlino. Rohde, too had contacted Mr. King hoping to have a word with Bishop Morlino.

I waited for a reply from Mr. King.

The next day I read this in Rohde's story (<http://ncronline.org/news/faith-parish/wisconsin-bishop-threatens-denial-sacraments-rumors-and-gossip>): "Neither Morlino nor anyone from the diocese would respond to a request for an interview. A spokesman from the diocese wrote in an email, "We have no hope that assisting *NCR* with a story will result in a just reporting of the facts regarding the sad situation in Platteville."

I read Maria Rohde's story and I tried to put myself in Mr. King's shoes, and frankly, the story comes across as plain vanilla, competent reporting. It's unclear why Mr. King thought it was hopeless to work with *NCR*'s reporter.

As I awaited a response from Mr. King, my expectations were quite low. Later in the day, however, Mr. King offered this email response to me:

"Tom, I'll offer you the very little the bishop has already said regarding this. Other than that we'll have no further remarks or answers for the *NCR*, nor have we furnished more information to other inquiring outlets.

Bishop Morlino: "This is an issue where the Congressman [Ryan] speaks well for himself. He is very aware of the demands of lay mission in the Church and he is free to carry that mission out as he does. There is no need for us, nor are we in a position, to enter into this discussion."

As I was waiting for an answer from Madison, I read another piece on *NCR*. Senior correspondent John Allen wrote about Cardinal Angelo Scola of Milan, widely considered a leading candidate to be the next pope, who addressed a symposium on Catholic social teaching at the Catholic University of the Sacred Heart in Milan.

Allen wrote:

Scola's comments were part of a broader argument that recovery from the global economic crisis that erupted in late 2007 requires not merely technical solutions, but "rethinking the paradigms that have regulated economic life by framing them in a more adequate anthropology."

Scola acknowledged the enormous human and social costs of the crisis, saying, "Just think of all those who have lost their jobs and eventually committed suicide."

Yet he said that to frame the crisis in purely economic terms is "reductive," arguing that underneath the financial tumult is a deeper "cultural paralysis" -- one measure of which, he said, is that the concept of "freedom" has been reduced entirely to "freedom of choice," as opposed to "freedom in relationship."

As the *NCR* editorial reminded us, "The line "The budget is a moral document" has become somewhat of an old saw, but cliché or not, that idea has never been more true than this year as Congress takes up the annual budget process."

Let's pray to God that no U.S. cardinal or bishop eventually says what Cardinal Scola recently said in

acknowledging the enormous human and social costs of the crisis and austerity budgets:

?Just think of all those who have lost their jobs and eventually committed suicide.?

[Tom Gallagher writes *NCR*'s Mission Management column. Contact him at tom@tomgallagheronline.com.]

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