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With new cuts, Congress turns its back on the poor

by Tony Magliano

Making a Difference

It's a good thing the Lord hears the cry of the poor, because Congress is barely listening.

Although the federal deficit of approximately \$1 trillion and the national debt of more than \$15 trillion are important realities that need to be seriously addressed, cutting and eliminating programs that aid the poor is morally unacceptable.

Aid to the poor is not the reason for the nation's high deficit and debt level. Rather, huge military budgets, two major wars, the Wall Street bailouts, large tax cuts for the wealthy, corporate tax loopholes, and the failure of government and companies to create the needed jobs are the causes of our fiscal woes.

A nation's moral integrity is judged by how well it addresses the needs of the poorest and most vulnerable. And by that standard, most corporations and the United States government have a long way to go.

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, more than one in seven people in the United States lives below the poverty line, and more than 20 percent of children are poor.

And according to United Nations, 1.4 billion people live in extreme poverty -- struggling to survive on less than \$1.25 a day. One billion people worldwide are hungry. Almost 1 billion human beings lack safe drinking water, and approximately 18,000 children die every single day from hunger and hunger related diseases.

Figures from the nonpartisan Congressional Budget Office reveal that cuts in the House of Representatives' fiscal year 2013 budget are so drastic that if passed into law, most of the federal government -- except for Social Security, health care and the military -- would cease to exist by 2050.

These cuts would have a disastrous effect on programs already not adequately funded, like the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (formerly known as food stamps) and the Special Supplemental Assistance Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC).

The Christian-based, anti-poverty organization Bread for the World states that "the problem of hunger and malnutrition today is not one of food production. As Bread for the World continues to emphasize, this is a political problem. It follows that we must work for political solutions."

But the political will in Congress to end hunger and malnutrition is simply not there.

Contrary to popular opinion, the federal government is not generous in its aid to the poorest of the poor. It gives only 0.6 percent of its annual budget to poverty-focused international assistance -- about \$19 billion. And according to Bread for the World, even that relatively small amount is in danger of Congress cutting it.

Life-saving assistance like international food and development aid, agricultural improvement, global health, clean water and sanitation programs are all under attack.

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It is absolutely essential for faithful Catholics and all people of goodwill to contact their members of Congress, urging them to put a circle of protection around every program that helps the domestic and global poor.

The Catholic social teaching principle known as the preferential option for the poor and vulnerable reminds us that in hard times, the poor deserve more help, not less.

In his powerful social justice encyclical "Populorum Progressio" ("On the Development of Peoples"), Pope Paul VI wrote "The same duty of solidarity that rests on individuals exists also for nations: 'Advanced nations have a very heavy obligation to help the developing peoples.'"

Remind Congress of this heavy obligation that is theirs.

[Tony Magliano is an internationally syndicated social justice and peace columnist.]

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