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Is Paul Ryan the new Dr. Death?

by Tom Gallagher

NCR Today

First there was Dr. Jack Kevorkian, the popular apostle of the modern-day euthanasia movement. Now comes Republican tea party Catholic Rep. Paul Ryan of Wisconsin. The newly appointed Republican vice presidential candidate, Ryan is the architect and "intellectual" driving force behind the Republicans' federal budget proposal, aptly called the Ryan Budget, that was rolled out in March. It has failed the U.S. bishops' moral criteria.

No amount of spinning and reframing of this dastardly document could possibly bring it within the outer orbit of the Catholic social teaching tradition, no matter how hard they try. And try they will.

CNN offered up a story over the weekend about five things to know about Ryan's economics.

On Medicare:

The idea is to one day let Medicare-approved private insurers compete with traditional Medicare on an exchange.

Seniors would pick a plan, and then get a fixed payment -- or "premium support" -- from the government to help pay for it.

Competing insurance plans would be required to offer a level of benefits at least as good as Medicare.

The premium support would be fixed at a level no higher than the second least-expensive insurance plan offered.

And annual per-capita cost increases in the Medicare program would be capped at 0.5% above overall growth in the economy.

The thinking is that competition would keep down the costs. But if it fails to sufficiently, the 0.5% cap would serve as a backup. And the government's share of costs would be limited to the level of the premium support.

One concern: That the plan would increase the financial burden on seniors.

On taxes:

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"The President's vision of higher tax rates for small businesses and more complexity in the tax code would exacerbate the problems with the current code and lead to economic decline," Ryan writes in the budget.

Ryan envisions a simpler system, with just two individual rates: 10% and 25%. And he wants to bring down the corporate rate to 25% from 35%. He would also kill the alternative minimum tax. Those changes mean a lot of lost tax revenue. To make up for some of that, Ryan would close some tax loopholes.

Budget experts take issue with a few elements in the plan. Though all want tax reform that closes loopholes and lowers rates, Ryan doesn't specify which loopholes.

Those details are a big deal. Breaks tied to mortgage interest, health care, charitable giving and low investment tax rates are popular and taking them away won't be easy.

Another issue: Absent details on which breaks get trimmed, the rich would see a big tax cut under Ryan's tax plan, according to TaxVox columnist Howard Gleckman, citing an analysis by the Tax Policy Center.

Unless rates are raised on capital gains and dividends, wrote Gleckman, "it is hard to imagine the highest income households getting anything other than a windfall from this budget."

Under President Obama's budget plan, the wealthy would see a big tax increase, according to TPC.

On the safety net:

"The social safety net is failing society's most vulnerable citizens and poised to unravel in the event of a spending-driven debt crisis, which is precisely when Americans would need it most," Ryan writes in the budget.

Ryan singles out Medicaid and food stamps. These programs are meant to aid low-income families, and are administered by state governments with heavy federal funding.

Ryan points to two problems with their current structure: Federal payments give states incentive to

add people to these programs and states don't have flexibility to achieve savings.

Ryan would move to so-called block grants for both programs. States would get a set amount of money from the federal government. That system would both cap federal liability and give states incentive to keep costs down.

Plus, states would be given more flexibility to tailor the program's requirements and enrollment criteria. Food stamp recipients, for example, would be required to work or enroll in a job training program.

Liberal critics say the plan would lead to a dramatic downsizing in those programs. They also worry block grants will restrict states' ability to expand enrollees during economic downturns -- when the need is greatest.

On government's role in the economy:

"The free enterprise system is being stifled by a federal bureaucracy fixated on depriving citizens and businesses of their ability to make social and economic decisions according to what is best for their own needs and interests," writes Ryan.

Ryan's budget goes after the Obama administration's regulatory framework around energy, finance and health care.

We already know that austerity budgets simply don't work. Look at any number of European countries right now that are trying to embrace austerity measures. Austerity *causes* suicide.

There are too many articles on this topic to include in this post, but click here for the list that comes up when one Googles "austerity & suicide."

Ryan and his uber-austerity federal budget proposal, fully endorsed by Gov. Mitt Romney, the presumptive Republican presidential nominee, will cause suicides in the U.S. if implemented.

Ryan's desire to create a voucher Medicare program and shift the massive financial burden to senior citizens will be a disaster and result in death to many seniors who will forego preventative health care, necessary procedures or the purchase of necessary medicines simply because the government voucher won't be enough to cover the costs.

A study released earlier this year offered this sobering news:

Meanwhile, health care costs are rising, and more than one in five people over age 50 say they have skipped doctor visits, switched to cheaper medications, or simply avoided certain medications altogether because the expense was too high. The increasing costs of medical care are also likely to offset the modest boost in Social Security that went into effect this January.

For many older Americans, the situation is desperate. Some 3.5 million seniors live in poverty, according to Census figures, but that number rises to about 6.2 million when health care costs are factored in. In 2010, the National Alliance to End Homelessness predicted that homeless rates among the elderly would climb by 33 percent -- or about 14,000 people -- within a decade's time.

Ryan and his uber-austerity federal budget proposal, fully endorsed by Gov. Mitt Romney, the presumptive Republican presidential nominee, will turn Medicare on its head if implemented and shift the financial burden to seniors, which will cause deaths of seniors in the U.S.

The Republican Tea Party Catholic Bishops Caucus, which includes archbishops William Lori of Baltimore; Charles Chaput of Philadelphia; John Neinstedt of St. Paul-Minneapolis; retired Bishop Joseph Martino of Scranton, Pa.; Bishop Daniel Jenky of Peoria, Ill.; and Bishop Kevin Rhodes of South Bend, Ind. Also included are their Republican staff at the U.S. bishops conference led by Anthony Picarello, the in-house lawyer leading the anti-Obama campaign; Richard Doerflinger, the permanent fixture in the so-called Pro-Life Office (it's really the "Anti-Abortion, Anti-Euthanasia Office"); and Sr. Mary Ann Walsh, the spokeswoman for the U.S. bishops, who now face a ticklish prospect with Ryan selected as a vice presidential pick with his pro-death federal budget proposal.

What to do now?

To be sure, it's not just Ryan.

The 50 Catholic Republican congressmen and women have voted more than once in favor of the Ryan Budget this year. The bishops in these congressional district remained silent. Now that's episcopal leadership.

Back in May, I wrote about the federal budget and sought interviews with Archbishop Jerome ListECKI of Milwaukee and Bishop Robert Morlino of Madison, since Ryan's district overlaps both dioceses. The bishops declined to chat, even though I submitted the questions in writing in advance. However, the responses I received from the bishops' spokespeople were stunning.

To put the notion of "pro-life" into better and more accurate context, Nicholas Cafardi wrote an interesting *NCR* story on which presidential candidate is actually pro-life. It's an important read.

The Republican Tea Party Catholic Bishops Caucus will be closely watched to see if they will apply equal animus in their rhetoric and political tactics in denouncing Romney and Ryan and the 50 other Republican Catholic members of Congress who support the pro-death Ryan Budget.

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