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Catholic academics sort out church social teachings

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NCR Today

What a breath of fresh air to see Catholic social teaching applied so clearly and so forcefully in these critical times. A group of some 120 Catholic theologians and other academics have penned a statement applying Catholic social teaching within the current political context. The statement, reported by NCR's Michael Sean Winter this morning, comes only hours before Vice President Joseph Biden and GOP vice presidential candidate square off in a nationally televised debate.

Consider these words collectively penned by more than one hundred Catholic men and women who know and teach Catholic matters:

We write as Catholic theologians, academics and ministers concerned for our nation and for the integrity of the teachings of the Roman Catholic Church. We write to hold up aspects of the Church's social doctrine that are profoundly relevant to the challenges our nation faces at this moment in history, yet are in danger of being ignored. At a moment when the ideas of Atlas Shrugged influence public debate and policy, we write to proclaim the Catholic truth that the stewardship of common good rests upon all of our shoulders together. This is a responsibility we dare not shrug. We fulfill this obligation in myriad ways, but indispensably among them, through the policies of our government. We highlight these principles of the Church's social doctrine in the hope that their substance will better influence our political and policy debates.

America is at a tipping point where the traditional commitment of our government to protecting and advancing the common good is in very real danger of being dismantled for generations. Members of the "Tea Party," libertarians, Ayn Rand followers and other proponents of small government have brought libertarian views of government into the mainstream; legitimating forms of social indifference. After decades of anti-government rhetoric and "starve the beast" tax cuts, some even appear to exploit predictable fiscal problems to establish a privatized, libertarian order that reduces society to a collection of individuals and shrinks the common good to fit the outcomes achievable by private, for profit firms.

These Catholics go on to list five principles of Catholic social teaching and apply these to Congressman Ryan's brutal and much touted budget, a budget adopted by the Republican party as its template for curing the nation's social and economic ills.

1. ***The Catholic view of the human person is social not individual.*** *Congressman Ryan has stated that he learned from Rand to view all policy questions as a "fight of individualism versus collectivism." The Catholic Church does not espouse "individualism," but rather sees it as an error as destructive as collectivism. ?*
2. ***Government has an essential role to play in protecting and promoting the common good.*** *The error of individualism leads to a mistaken understanding of the role of government. For too long politicians have echoed Ronald Reagan's misleading mantra "Government is the Problem." The Catholic Church, on the contrary, because of its social understanding of the human person, considers government to be as "necessary" for human nature as the family. ?*
3. ***The doctrine of subsidiarity both limits government and demands that it act when local communities cannot solve problems on their own.*** *Subsidiarity has both negative and positive dimensions. Negatively, it limits overreach by government (as well as other large organizations, including corporations). Positively, the concept (which means "help" or "assistance)" requires that government act when problems cannot be solved on the local level. ?*
4. ***The "preferential option for the poor" demands both individual and collective action, including the acts of the state.*** *In the words of John Paul II, the preferential option for the poor affects "our daily life as well as our decisions in the political and economic fields;" placing demands upon individuals as well as "leaders of nations." ?*
5. ***Economic forces must be reckoned among any serious account of the threats to society and human dignity.*** *Ryan's budget resolutions speak mainly of overbearing government and free individuals acting in a private sector whose justice is never questioned.*

The Catholic statement concludes:

The momentous challenges facing our nation cry out for the full wisdom of the Church's social doctrine. We live at time when the social indifference of libertarian thought is achieving broad cultural legitimacy and political power. This vision of the human person and society are fundamentally at odds with the Gospel and the principles of Catholic Social Doctrine. Legitimate disagreements with the Obama administration must not lead the Church to edit the fullness of its teachings for political expediency. Our political obligations as Catholics go beyond choosing a candidate for which to vote. In the words of Faithful Citizenship, [the U.S. Catholic bishops guide to faithful political involvement] "our participation should help transform the party to which we belong." Ours is a moment that demands the fullness of the Church's teachings as few others have. To be truly prophetic, the Church's bishops, clergy and lay faithful must proclaim the fullness of its message to all parties, movements, and powers.

Gratitude to these men and women who understand and take Catholic social teaching seriously.

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