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Paul Ryan's budget undermines the best of America

by Simone Campbell

Commentary

Last year, some of my sisters and I became known as the Nuns on the Bus. Together, we journeyed through many parts of America to raise awareness of the plight of working poor families and the threat Wisconsin Rep. Paul Ryan's budget posed to them and to our country as a whole. Last week, Rep. Ryan unveiled his new Republican budget. It is a budget that rewards wealth instead of work; one that reflects the worst of Ayn Rand as it undermines the best of America. It will take from working poor families to spend more on the wealthy, and it won't even reduce the national debt.

Paul Ryan hasn't called me recently for advice on his budget, but the one piece of advice I wish he would take would be to remember that his budget is not about numbers; it is about people. It is not about charts but about God's children.

I wish he could have been with us on our bus journey when we met Billy and his wife in Milwaukee. They are two of the more than 20 million working Americans who earn so little that they still live in poverty. Both Billy and his wife work, but they make so little that they qualify for and use food stamps to help put meals on the table for themselves and their children.

Reading about Billy isn't the same as meeting him. He's not a name, not a number -- he is a young man working his hardest to support his family. But Paul Ryan has said Billy and his family shouldn't get food stamps because Billy is working.

Think about that for a second. Because he works, we should deny Billy's children a decent meal at the end of the day? Paul Ryan and others will say we can't afford these "handouts" to people like Billy. But when we invest in food stamps to make sure Billy and his family don't go hungry, we aren't just investing in Billy's family. We're investing in Billy's employer by ensuring it has a productive employee. We're investing in future employers by ensuring Billy's children have enough to eat, knowing the significant

correlation between childhood hunger and poor performance at school and work later in life. We're investing in consumers because better work leads to lower prices.

In short, when we invest in workers like Billy, we not only invest in one of God's children but also in America. That concept of the common good is central to Catholic social teaching and is something Ayn Rand and Paul Ryan have never seemed to understand.

Paul Ryan sees government programs as evil. I see children sleeping in cars, pregnant women without health care, and the elderly unable to pay for their medication as the real evils. Yet that is the reality for far too many Americans, and Paul Ryan's budget would make it so for even more.

Paul Ryan and many Republican colleagues argue that we should cut government programs because churches should provide these services, an argument not based in reality. The need is simply too great. Bread for the World released a study last year showing that every house of worship in this country would have to raise an additional \$50,000 in revenue each year just to be able to fill the void the Ryan budget would create -- \$50,000 from each church, synagogue and mosque in America. That's a huge new tax Paul Ryan would place on all our churches, a burden many could not afford.

Ryan also completely ignores the fact that churches and faith groups like Catholic Charities depend heavily on government programs like food stamps to support their work and provide the services that help so many of America's struggling families. There is a powerful public-private partnership between our churches and government that fuels America's safety net. Without government, that safety net will fail and more children will go hungry in this wealthy nation. That is immoral.

As a nation, we must address both the suffering and its causes. Pope Benedict, in his encyclical *Caritas in Veritate*, said we must work toward a society where each worker can earn enough to support his or her family. If we raised workers' wages instead of CEO bonuses, there wouldn't be as many working parents in need of food stamps. But Paul Ryan and his congressional allies are also fighting to prevent the minimum wage from being tied to the cost of living. Meanwhile, they champion more tax cuts on the bonuses CEOs get when the workers who create their wealth are laid off.

So I wish Paul Ryan would take my advice and think of families like Billy's who would be devastated by his budget. But perhaps if he won't listen to me, he will listen to the prophet Isaiah, whose words to his government leaders thousands of years ago feel especially apt for our Congress today: "If you do away with the yoke of oppression, with the pointing finger and malicious talk, and if you spend yourselves in behalf of the hungry and satisfy the needs of the oppressed, then your light will rise in the darkness, and your night will become like the noonday."

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[Sr. Simone Campbell, executive director of NETWORK, a national Catholic social justice lobby, since 2004, is a religious leader, attorney and poet with extensive experience in public policy and advocacy for systemic change. She is also a leader of the Nuns on the Bus campaign.]

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