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Churches Pass On Loaves and Fishes

Ken Briggs | Jul. 18, 2013 NCR Today

The House of Representatives votes to slash funds for food stamps and American churches, on the whole, take it in stride.

On a Republican driven effort to undercut basic human subsistence, there is nothing even close to a unified Christian or interfaith cry of protest. No call for a march on Washington to demand that this assault be reversed.

Why?

Perhaps religious leaders are counting on the Senate to roll it back or supplemental funds to cover the loss. Since it's hard to believe Congress does anything in a straight forward or candid manner, something will come along to fill the gap. A shaky proposition but maybe.

Or, less probably, significant portions of religious communities believe, as some members of Congress do, that the Bible teaches that food only go to those who earn it by the sweat of their brow. That angle doesn't accord well with Jesus' "least of these" admonition -- presumably those who cannot find work, the disabled, the old -- but in theory that could have obstructed a common outcry.

Internal church troubles also invite explanations. Most mainline churches, including Catholicism, are obsessed with conflict and decline within their ranks, leaving no time or energy on social issues. Church burnout, if you will.

Related to that hypothesis is the elasticity of Christian ethics themselves. What counts as moral urgency differs from one branch of Christianity to another, usually focused on single issues such as peace or abortion, and whatever external energies do exist get funneled there.

Even such fragmentation over what matters ethically doesn't appear to rule out broad agreement on something so essential as food for those in need, however. It may be that a deep malaise has fallen over the religious scene, spurred by the loss of its status and influence and its embrace of cultural individualism that makes efforts toward the common good seem futile.

We're familiar with Jesus' turning the tables on his followers in his "least of these" lesson. Among the ministries he commends are clothing the naked, visiting the prisoner and feeding the hungry. No problem, they say, if we ever saw you in such dire straits you can bet your bottom dollar we'd be right there to put a shirt on your back, find your cell and feed you all you want. The trouble is, he replies, that those deprived souls on the streets are ME, and if you pass them by you ignore me.

There may be excuses for failing to stand up for those who are hungry, but I don't think any of them pass the "least of these" test. It all depends whom churches depend upon to "deliver us this day our daily bread."

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