NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (https://www.ncronline.org)

Faith leaders welcome government reopening, point to unfinished work

Mark Pattison Catholic News Service | Oct. 18, 2013
Washington

Religious leaders welcomed the congressional deal of Wednesday that reopened the federal government after a 16-day shutdown, but some cast wary glances at the unfinished business of Congress as well as the circumstances that brought about the shutdown in the first place.

"The shutdown has had a widespread impact on many people, especially the poor, who suffered for lack of basic services during the period," said a statement Thursday by Bishop Stephen Blaire of Stockton, Calif., chairman of the U.S. bishops' Committee on Domestic Justice and Human Development.

"With the government now open, beneficiaries of government services, particularly the elderly and children, can hope to resume a normal life with a safety net securely in place," Blaire said.

The bishops had hoped that the deal that reopened the government and raised the debt ceiling into early 2014 would have included a provision granting a wider exemption to the Health and Human Services contraceptive mandate required of most employers, but no such provision was in the package.

"The bishops have pressed for legislative relief from the HHS mandate since its inception more than two years ago," said a statement Thursday from Archbishop William Lori of Baltimore, chairman of the bishops' Ad Hoc Committee on Religious Liberty. "Church efforts to protect rights of conscience will continue despite this temporary setback."

Network, the Catholic social justice lobby, said in a statement Thursday it was pleased with the vote that ended the shutdown, but "our gratitude is tempered by the devastating impact of recent congressional extremism on people at the economic margins. We also hope that lessons have been learned about how not to govern."

"It is fair that furloughed federal workers, who were literally locked out of their offices, be paid so they can care for their families. However, little attention is paid to the plight of low-wage government contract workers who will lose two-and-a-half weeks of pay," the statement said.

"Many work in government lunchrooms and mailrooms, clean the buildings and perform other needed duties. And a large number are people with disabilities. There are also many, many others living paycheck to paycheck, including those who depend on tourism, who will never recover their losses. As usual, people at the economic margins suffer the most. That is unconscionable."

As for the nation's fiscal outlook, Network said, "it is shortsighted to focus only on the debt -- which is already projected to go down as a percentage of GDP -- and budget deficits -- which have dropped substantially. Instead we need to invest in our nation in order to build it up. Our future depends on it."

The U.S. bishops are part of the Circle of Protection coalition, formed to make sure budget policies don't

adversely affect the poor. Coalition members waged a "faithful filibuster" -- reading aloud from the Bible across the street from the Capitol for a week whenever Congress was in session until the deal was reached.

"I want to acknowledge the mysterious influence and power of prayer that spread across the nation to help reopen our broken political process and protect the nation from more catastrophe," said a statement Thursday from the Rev. Jim Wallis of Sojourners, another coalition member.

"Though we are grateful to God for an end to the crisis, we cannot simply exchange one deadline for another," said a statement Thursday from the Rev. David Beckmann, head of Bread for the World, another coalition member. "We need to address the root of the problem, and we need to address sequestration."

Sequestration began last March after Congress failed to reach a broad deficit-reduction deal. Since then, 57,000 children have been turned away from Head Start, and Meals on Wheels cuts have left some low-income seniors without food baskets. The second round of sequestration cuts go into effect Jan. 15 -- the same date funding to keep the federal government open expires under the shutdown deal. Cuts to Head Start, the Women Infants and Children nutrition program, and international emergency food aid could be in the offing.

In an address Thursday, President Barack Obama identified immigration reform and the farm bill among the items Congress needs to consider promptly now that the government is reopen.

"It was promising to hear President Obama mention specifically the unfinished business that is the farm bill in his address to the nation," said a statement Thursday from Roger Johnson, president of the National Farmers Union. "Now that conferees have been named, it is time for the committee to get down to business and take action to bring certainty to our family farmers, ranchers, fishermen, rural residents and hungry neighbors."

Source URL (retrieved on *07/26/2016 - 16:24*): https://www.ncronline.org/news/politics/faith-leaders-welcome-government-reopening-point-unfinished-work