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The War on Poverty

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Distinctly Catholic

Yesterday was the anniversary of President Lyndon Johnson's State of the Union address announcing a "war on poverty." It was Johnson's first State of the Union Address. In President Ronald Reagan's last State of the Union, he delivered a sentence that has become a meme in conservative, Republican circles: "We fought a war on poverty, and poverty won." Yesterday, countless talking heads from both parties debated the value of LBJ's war on poverty and, in both cases, exposed their own intellectual impoverishment.

To be clear, I am grateful that both parties are speaking about poverty. It is a scandal that some 46 million fellow Americans live below the poverty line and that millions more, who live just above that line, lack much in the way of opportunity to join the middle class. In recent years, Republicans and Democrats alike declined to address the issue. President Obama could say the words "middle class" dozens of times in a single speech but never mention the poor. Republicans simply dismissed the poor as "takers." So, the fact that leaders in both parties are finally willing to address the issue is a step in the right direction.

How sad, however, that the discussion immediately descends to the most tired of tired boilerplate.

Let us start with the most important fact: The war on poverty was a great success but not a total success. Poverty rates declined precipitously. In 1967, 25.8 percent of the population lived in poverty. Today, that number stands at 16 percent. By any reasonable evaluation, that is a success. Or, take another number. Today, the poverty rate among seniors is about 9 percent. If you took away Social Security, part of the New Deal but expanded under Johnson, 44 percent of elderly Americans would live in poverty. And,

another important consequence of the Great Society programs is that millions of Americans are above the poverty line who, without key government programs, would fall below it. Finally, there is the very important fact that poverty is no longer attended by the other horsemen of social distress that formerly accompanied it, malnutrition and lack of basic health care: Food stamps and Medicaid have seen to that.

Sen. Marco Rubio delivered a speech yesterday, much hyped and well delivered, but short on ideas. He wants to turn over most federal anti-poverty programs to the states, recognizing the diversity of the country and the often inefficient and ineffective methods of the federal bureaucracy. I would, in general, support such an idea if ? and this is not only a big if but a threshold one ? there was any sign that Republican leaders at the state or municipal level were chomping at the bit to embrace new strategies to deal with poverty. But they aren't and, lacking that evidence, Rubio's proposal is exceedingly unserious. I do think Rubio's idea to replace the Earned Income Tax Credit with something less complicated warrants attention. I once tried to help some refugee friends fill out the EITC form and I could not make heads-or-tails of it.

On the other hand, Democrats are not exactly brimming with ideas either beyond defending the status quo. Ideas conceived in the 1960s certainly need re-working. If you do not believe me, look back at some of the urban planning efforts that were part of the Great Society. I remember an old National Geographic that illustrated the plan for Pennsylvania Avenue, here in Washington. A series of low, square, identical buildings were proposed to replace the admittedly ugly hodgepodge which was America's Main Street. But, the new structures were as ugly as the old and totally impersonal, the kind of thing we associate with Stalinist realism. Mercifully, that plan was never undertaken and Pennsylvania Avenue, through a mix of private and public development, became an organic, thriving and, if not beautiful, at least not oppressive ugly, street. Many downtown neighborhoods were uprooted and replaced with similar designs. Hartford and New Haven in my home state still bear the marks of urban planners who lacked all sense of feeling for the human and the personal. Why should it not be the same for anti-poverty programs? Shouldn't they be adjusted from their '60s formulae and made less impersonal?

The other key thing, little discussed in recent days, is that government action does not happen in a vacuum. Other important socio-cultural forces are at work simultaneously and can be deeply resistant to government efforts. The Great Society came towards the end of the second Great Migration of black Americans from the rural South to the urban North and West. There had been a great deal of dislocation already within black communities when the Great Society came along. LBJ's programs had a very profound effect on poverty rates among black Americans, cutting that rate in half in one decade. Again, that is a great success story. But, the problem was, through no fault of their own, black Americans who were successful in escaping poverty wanted out of the urban ghettos to which they had moved during the Great Migrations. Those left behind soon lacked entrepreneurial and professional role models. Other ladders into the middle class, such as education, suffered too as urban schools became a hellish nightmare. I cannot begrudge those who succeeded in escaping poverty from removing themselves from the ghetto. But, liberals must recognize that the cultural, familial breakdowns that followed among those left behind, and the ensuing socio-cultural pathologies that followed, were not the kind of ailments to be resolved with a simple federal program. Ameliorated, yes. Solved, no.

The issue of poverty should elicit an 'all hands on deck' response from our political culture, but that is unlikely in polarized D.C. But, I have an idea. Addressing the issue of poverty at its root, finding new, innovative ways to help liberate people from its chains, will certainly require an active civil society. The Catholic Church is well placed not only to assist those who have been left behind, but to help those who can climb out of their dismal circumstances to do so, all the while mindful that the Church of Jesus Christ must always, and unapologetically, stand for those who will never improve their circumstances. Every diocese in the country has a Catholic Charities director. Every state has a Catholic Conference. The

Church should, at the local level, convene other religious and non-profit groups, to meet with local government leaders and discuss ways to address poverty in our day, not LBJ's. They should seek to come to some agreement about what they do need from Washington. They should ask what the business community can and will contribute. They should analyze what can be done to support families and help them stay together: Rubio was right that single parenthood is one of the chief indicators, and perhaps incubators, of poverty. Catholic school leaders and public school leaders need to abandon their sense of competition and see which type of school handles which types of students best, and divide up the work, perhaps even learning from each other in the process. Building trades should be enlisted to teach young people skills. A federally funded program to put teenagers to work in the summers, perhaps away from the stresses of urban neighborhoods, should be explored. There is plenty to be done.

Sadly, both political parties tend to prefer talking points to solutions. Maybe a Church less inclined to culture wars could actually launch the kind of cultural effort, not a war, we could all support and which Pope Francis seems to be calling for, an effort to go to the margins of our own society, encounter the poor, and, just so, to humanize ourselves and make ours a more humane society. It must be done one person at a time, but that does not mean the effort is simply a private affair. There is a role for government. There is a role for the business community. There is a role for the Church. All hands on deck. Our plans, like LBJ's, will never succeed totally. 'Total' is not a word with a happy history in politics. But, we Catholics know we must keep trying to alleviate the sufferings of the poor because we are ordered by the Lord to do so. And, if, like LBJ, we can cut the number of people in poverty in half, that will be no small achievement.

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