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In Defense of Paul Ryan

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Distinctly Catholic

I received a flurry of emails yesterday, some personal, some from left wing organizations, all attacking Congressman Paul Ryan for remarks he made about poverty in the inner city. Here are two accounts of the kerfuffle, one from Politico and one from CNN.

The comments at issue were these:

We have got this tailspin of culture, in our inner cities in particular, of men not working and just generations of men not even thinking about working or learning the value and the culture of work, and so there is a real culture problem here that has to be dealt with.

Congresswoman Barbara Lee pounced: "My colleague Congressman Ryan's comments about 'inner city' poverty are a thinly veiled racial attack and cannot be tolerated. Let's be clear, when Mr. Ryan says 'inner city' when he says, 'culture,' these are simply code words for what he really means: 'black,'" Cong. Lee did not provide any evidence for this claim about her colleagues real thoughts.

Ryan later admitted his remarks were inarticulate, and that "I was not implicating the culture of one community" but of society as a whole. We have allowed our society to isolate or quarantine the poor rather than integrate people into our communities. The predictable result has been multi-generational poverty and little opportunity. "The broader point I was trying to make is that we cannot settle for this status quo and that government and families have to do more and rethink our approach to fighting poverty."

In this back-and-forth, I wish to give the benefit of the doubt to Cong. Ryan. And, I do so for a variety of reasons.

First, we on the left have been complaining that Republicans like don't give a hoot about the poor, and not without cause. I remember Cong. Ryan speaking at Georgetown in 2012 and talking about subsidiarity and federalism and how the federal government should not be the lead actor in anti-poverty efforts. I thought at the time: That would be credible if he could point to any single Republican governor or mayor who was actually attempting some innovative anti-poverty efforts, but he can't, so the invocation of subsidiarity in this regard is a smokescreen. It is obvious that Ryan has been trying to wrestle with the issue of poverty since then, and I think we have an obligation not to throw his words back in his teeth the second they are uttered. That is not the way to create a bipartisan consensus on the need for our nation to confront lingering poverty in our midst.

Second, in the CNN post linked above, Bob Woodson, who has been guiding Ryan's efforts to find new approaches to fighting poverty, said that Ryan needs to stop listening to conservative ideologues: "The only thing they are passionate about is the failures of the poor," Woodson said. Just to be clear, Ryan may be wading into the waters of anti-poverty policy, but we should not expect him to suddenly disassociate himself from the people he has listened to all his life. I hope Ryan takes Woodson's advice. I hope, too, and imagine that Ryan's conversation with conservative ideologues are two-way streets and he may be able to inject some of his concern for the poor into their calculations. But, again, conversions usually take time and the fact that Ryan repeated a somewhat clumsy phrasing he may have heard from some conservative think tanker should not blind us to the significance of having the Chair of the House Budget Committee apparently thinking as deeply as he is capable of thinking about the on-going scourge of poverty.

Third, I contest Cong. Lee's suggestion that the words "inner city" are code for "black." Even if it were true, how are we to focus on the very real problems of the inner city if we cannot even mention the words? This reminds me of the kerfuffle about whether or not the word "thug" always implies a racial epithet. Maybe it does for some, but when I think of a "thug," I think of the Godfather movies. In the past several days, I reviewed Molly Worthen's book on evangelicalism and one of the fine points she made was that the invocation of a "Christian worldview" was, as often as not, used to end debate not to encourage it. I worry that too many on the left, armed with a hyper-sensitivity to what words may or may not have racial overtones, will use their sensitivity in a similar way, to shut down debate. Certainly, Congresswoman Lee said nothing to encourage her colleague to continue his effort to re-think anti-poverty programs. If one cannot talk about the particular problems of urban poverty without being accused of being a racist, it is hard to figure out how the debate will be furthered. Who does that help? Certainly not the urban poor.

Finally, I think it bears mentioning that Ryan is correct to identify poverty as a cultural problem, the solution to which will require not just a government program, but the engagement of civic and religious leaders. It is dishonest not to recognize the link between poverty and single motherhood, yet it is also morally obscene to heap scorn on single mothers. So, we must discern ways to walk about these issues, and the first step is to agree not to jump down each others' throats when a certain word or phrase strikes us as having a racial overtone. Coincidentally, yesterday, I was in the green room at NPR, waiting to go on "Tell Me More," to discuss Pope Francis. A woman was there for another segment on gentrification. I mentioned that in my neighborhood, the usual racial roles were reversed: Highly educated, affluent, black professionals are displacing working class white families, with a steady accompaniment of first or second generation Latino immigrants who have work ethics so strong, they will permit them to quickly move up the socio-economic scale.

Congresswoman Lee, and some of her Democratic colleagues, resist thinking about how culture affects poverty. They do not always feel comfortable talking about the importance of two-parent families. They

complain about the quality of urban schools but also refuse to support vouchers for Catholic schools. They understandably support federal anti-poverty efforts but seem disinclined to think beyond the paradigm of a government policy as a cure or amelioration for poverty. They are as hidebound in their thinking as some conservative ideologues who think the poor are just lazy loafers, the ?takers.?

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My approach to poverty is simple: All hands on deck. But, that will require the professional chatterers to learn to give the benefit of the doubt to someone like Ryan when he says something that could be perceived as having a racial overtone. If Ryan chickens out in pursuing a genuine anti-poverty agenda, if he concludes that there is no role for the federal government, or if he thinks the market can cure the problem of poverty, I shall be the first to denounce him as a fraud. But, reading his comments, I found nothing racist in them and think the blowback is misplaced and, what is more, likely to prevent Ryan from moving towards a place we want him to be: Creating, within the bosom of the Republican Party, a concern for the poor.

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