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An Immoral Budget That Shuns Social Justice

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By Bryan N. Massingale and John Gehring
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After months of headlines about birth control and public discussions narrowly focused on sexuality, it's time for a broader values debate about the real moral scandals of rising poverty, income disparity, home foreclosures and tax policies that coddle the wealthiest few. The upcoming battle over the federal budget demands that we explore how misguided economic policies undermine Christian principles of justice and the common good.

Rep. Paul Ryan (R-Wis.) - chairman of the House Budget Committee and a Catholic who says he prays daily for the fiscal health of our country - has released a federal budget proposal that fails the moral test of his own faith tradition and disregards our nation's responsibility to care for the most vulnerable. His misguided plans call for the elderly, working Americans and the poor to sacrifice even more, while corporations and millionaires are rewarded with generous tax breaks.

This budget, frankly, acts like a schoolyard bully. It kicks those who are already down. It punches holes in vital social safety net programs, including food assistance for struggling families. It shoves aside the Medicare guarantee for seniors who deserve quality health care. It tramples Medicaid for low-income Americans by proposing inadequate state block grants at a time when most states are barely able to pay their bills.

For good reason, Ryan's proposals have been strongly criticized by social justice leaders, evangelicals and many Catholics. Why? Because we know that budgets reflect stark moral choices about our priorities and values.

In response to Ryan's Republican budget last year, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops warned House leaders that "a just framework for future budgets cannot rely on disproportionate cuts in essential services to poor persons." Just recently, the bishops' conference called on Congress to protect the safety net from harmful budget cuts. Ryan has ignored their wise counsel.

Ryan takes his Catholic faith seriously and has defended his policy approach in strong moral terms. But it seems he needs a refresher course in basic Catholic teaching. The Catholic justice tradition - as defined by bishops and popes over the centuries - holds a positive role for government, advocates a "preferential option for the poor" and recognizes that those with greater means should contribute a fair share in taxes to serve the common good.

Ryan and other conservatives hold tax cuts for hedge fund managers on Wall Street sacred even as they dismiss concern about rising income inequality as "class warfare." In contrast, Pope Benedict XVI denounces the "scandal of glaring inequalities." This is an accurate description when the 400 wealthiest Americans now have a greater combined net worth than the bottom 150 million Americans.

It seems that Ryan's budget is more indebted to his hero Ayn Rand than to the message of Jesus. Rand, a libertarian icon who mocked all religion and rejected the Gospel's ethic of compassion, has been praised by Ryan for explaining "the morality of individualism." Catholic values reject such radical individualism and the social callousness that it breeds.

A Catholic vision for a just economy is rooted in the conviction that we are all in this together, and not just isolated individuals locked in a Darwinian struggle for survival. In fact, it was another Ryan - the noted writer on labor and inequality, Msgr. John Ryan - who in 1919 drafted a bold plan for Catholic bishops that helped lay the moral groundwork for President Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal.

These visionary proposals, which included a call for minimum wages, insurance for the elderly and unemployed, labor rights and housing for workers, put human dignity at the heart of public policy. It's tragic that nearly a century later, influential Catholic members of Congress are now promoting economic agendas that undermine and even betray this proud legacy.

We need to reject the false and immoral choice that we can only address the national debt and be fiscally responsible if we balance budgets on the backs of those already straining to stand up straight.

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