



United States Conference of Catholic Bishops

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May 5, 2011

United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Senator:

On behalf of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, we write to address the moral and human dimensions of the ongoing budget debate in the Senate and the nation. In light of growing deficits, Congress faces difficult choices about how to balance needs and resources and allocate burdens and sacrifices. We welcome the efforts of those who have offered serious plans and encourage other leaders to do the same. These choices are economic, political, and moral. This important national discussion requires wise bipartisan leadership, clear priorities, and moral clarity.

We write as pastors and teachers, not experts or partisans. We wish to express our prayers and gratitude to you and other leaders for your generous service to our nation. We also wish to clearly acknowledge the difficult challenges that the Congress, Administration and government at all levels face to get our financial house in order: fulfilling the demands of justice and moral obligations to future generations; controlling future debt and deficits; and protecting the lives and dignity of those who are poor and vulnerable.

We welcome the kind of bipartisan action that prevented a federal government shutdown and averted the hardships that would have come with failure to reach agreement on the FY 2011 continuing resolution. We are particularly grateful for three essential elements of the bipartisan agreement: expanded funding for the D.C. Opportunity Scholarship Fund, which is a matter of justice for poor children; restoration of the prohibition on the use of federally appropriated funds for abortions in the District of Columbia; and the fact that spending cuts to programs that serve poor and vulnerable people in our nation and around the world were significantly less than originally proposed. We hope this agreement will lead to more bipartisan cooperation to defend human life and dignity and offer opportunity and help to those most in need.

As Catholic bishops, we lead a community that brings both moral principles and everyday experience to this discussion. We defend the unborn, feed the hungry, shelter the homeless, educate the young, welcome refugees, and care for the sick both at home and abroad. As teachers, we offer several moral criteria to help guide difficult budgetary decisions:

1. Every budget decision should be assessed by whether it protects or threatens human life and dignity.
2. A central moral measure of any budget proposal is how it affects “the least of these” (Matthew 25). The needs of those who are hungry and homeless, without work or in poverty should come first.
3. Government and other institutions have a shared responsibility to promote the common good of all, especially ordinary workers and families who struggle to live in dignity in difficult economic times.

We will also apply these principles and experience to assess other proposals as the debate continues. A just framework for future budgets cannot rely on disproportionate cuts in essential services to poor persons. It requires shared sacrifice by all, including raising adequate revenues, eliminating unnecessary military and other spending, and addressing the long-term costs of health insurance and

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retirement programs fairly. The *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* teaches: “Just, efficient and effective public financing will ... encourage employment growth, ... sustain business and non-profit activities” and help guarantee “systems of social insurance and protection that are designed above all to protect the weakest members of society.” All spending and tax proposals should be reviewed in light of their impact on poor families and children. In this letter we do not offer a detailed critique of entire budget proposals, but we ask you to consider the human and moral dimensions of several key choices facing the Congress.

Access to affordable, life-affirming health care remains an urgent national priority. We recognize that the rising costs of Medicare, Medicaid and other entitlement programs need to be addressed, but we urge that the needs of the poor, working families and vulnerable people be protected. Cost cutting proposals should not simply shift health care costs from the federal government to the states or directly to beneficiaries. Such measures could leave more elderly, working families and poor people without the assurance of adequate and affordable health care. We also are deeply concerned about the human and social costs of substantial cuts to programs that serve families working to escape poverty, especially food and nutrition, child development and education, and affordable housing programs.

International assistance is an essential tool to promote human life and dignity, advance solidarity with poorer nations, and enhance global security. It supports a wide range of life-saving programs, including: drugs to combat diseases; assistance to poor farmers and orphans; food aid for starving people; aid to victims of natural disasters; and help to refugees fleeing for their lives. The House Budget Resolution appears to cut the foreign operations budget by more than a third. We do not support the entire foreign operations budget, but we strongly support poverty-focused international assistance. A cut of this magnitude is likely to devastate poverty-focused efforts and the people who depend on it. We ask the Senate to support poverty-focused assistance and to continue reform of foreign assistance so it is even more effective for the poorest people in the poorest places on earth.

The Catholic bishops of the United States stand ready to work with leaders of both parties for a budget that reduces future deficits, protects poor and vulnerable people, advances the common good, and promotes human life and dignity. The debate on the federal budget FY 2012 will raise important and substantive issues for discussion, and at the same time raise serious concerns about how budget proposals meet the criterion of adequately protecting poor and vulnerable people.

The moral measure of this budget debate is not which party wins or which powerful interests prevail, but rather how those who are jobless, hungry, homeless or poor are treated. Their voices are too often missing in these debates, but they have the most compelling moral claim on our consciences and our common resources.

Sincerely yours,



Most Reverend Stephen E. Blaire
Bishop of Stockton
Chairman, Committee on Domestic Justice
and Human Development



Most Reverend Howard J. Hubbard
Bishop of Albany
Chairman, Committee on International
Justice and Peace