



## **Committee on Domestic Justice and Human Development Committee on International Justice and Peace**

3211 FOURTH STREET NE • WASHINGTON DC 20017-1194 • 202-541-3160  
WEBSITE: WWW.USCCB.ORG/JPHD • FAX 202-541-3339

March 18, 2013

United States Senate  
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Senator:

As Chairmen of the Catholic bishops' Committees on Domestic Justice and Human Development and International Justice and Peace, we wish to address the moral and human dimensions of the federal budget in light of the budget resolutions under consideration in both chambers of Congress. As we have often observed in the past, we support the goal of reducing future unsustainable deficits, but insist that this worthy goal be pursued in ways that protect poor and vulnerable people at home and abroad.

As Catholic pastors, we continue to emphasize that these choices are economic, political, and moral. We offer the following timeless moral criteria to guide difficult budgetary choices:

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.

As you debate the budget resolutions, we hope these criteria will shape your choices. We join with other Christian leaders in calling for a "**circle of protection**" around our brothers and sisters at home and abroad who are poor and vulnerable.

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." While we lack the competence to offer a detailed critique of entire budget proposals, we do ask you to consider the human and moral dimensions of these choices.

Our nation has an obligation to address the impact of future deficits on the health of the economy, to ensure stability and security for future generations, and to use limited resources efficiently and effectively. 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 retirement programs fairly.

We are profoundly concerned that the allocation for non-defense discretionary spending be large enough to maintain current commitments to poor persons. Cuts in this allocation, which includes many domestic and international poverty-focused programs, will have a disproportionate impact on vulnerable families. This is especially true of the dramatic cuts envisioned in the House Budget resolution.

Non-defense discretionary spending that serves poor and vulnerable people includes but is not limited to: **Head Start; Emergency Food and Shelter Program; improved workforce training and development; safe and affordable housing;** the **DC Opportunity Scholarship Program**, which provides vital assistance to poor families in the nation's capital in seeking out high-quality education for their children;

as well as **poverty-focused international assistance** programs that save lives, treat and prevent disease, make farmers more productive, help orphans, feed victims of disasters, and protect refugees, enhancing global security.

The House proposed budget drastically cuts mandatory programs (not including Social Security, health care programs, civil service pensions, farm programs, and interest payments) by about \$800 billion over ten years, relative to current law. This figure is very concerning, since 70 percent of the spending in this budget category goes for programs to help poor and vulnerable people. Programs in this category include programs that the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) has consistently supported: **Pell Grants**; the **Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program** (SNAP, formerly known as food stamps); the **Supplemental Security Income** program (SSI) for the aged and disabled people in poverty; **School lunches and other child nutrition** programs; the **Earned Income Tax Credit** and the low-income component of the **Child Tax Credit**; and **Temporary Assistance for Needy Families**.

The budget proposals before the House and Senate would attempt to achieve savings through reforms to the Medicare and Medicaid programs. The bishops have devoted their efforts to addressing the morally problematic features of health care reform rather than repealing the law. We warn against shifting rising health care costs to vulnerable seniors, people with disabilities, and those who are poor, without controlling these costs. The bishops have consistently advocated for the principle that “health care is more than a commodity; it is a basic human right, an essential safeguard of human life and dignity.” (*A Framework for Comprehensive Health Care Reform*, USCCB)

The Senate proposal does not include enough detail to assess the impact of potential reductions in mandatory spending, such as in health and nutrition programs. However, Congress should keep to the commitment in the proposal to protect beneficiaries from any harm in reducing spending or reforming these programs.

As pastors, we see every day the human consequences of budget choices. Our Catholic community defends the unborn, feeds the hungry, shelters the homeless, educates the young, and cares for the sick, both at home and abroad. We help poor families rise above crushing poverty, resettle refugees fleeing conflict and persecution, and reach out to communities devastated by wars, natural disasters and famines.

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, but they have the most compelling moral claim on our consciences and our common resources. The bishops 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.

Sincerely yours,



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



Most Reverend Richard E. Pates  
Bishop of Des Moines  
Chairman, Committee on International Justice  
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