



United States Conference of Catholic Bishops

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Joint Select Committee on Deficit Reduction
United States Congress
Washington, DC

Dear Members of the Joint Select Committee on Deficit Reduction:

On behalf of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, we write to you with the same message that we sent all members of the Joint Select Committee on Deficit Reduction to offer you our encouragement and support as you address an essential and difficult responsibility: Helping our nation put its fiscal house in order, and doing so in ways that safeguard the lives and dignity of poor and vulnerable people in our own nation and around the world. We promise our prayers as you work across party lines to match needs and resources, and share burdens and sacrifices to achieve a more just, responsible and prosperous nation. We also express gratitude for your leadership and your dedicated service to our nation during these challenging times.

As Catholic bishops, we approach these matters as pastors and teachers, not experts or partisans. We lead a community that brings both moral principles and everyday experience to this discussion. The Catholic community defends the unborn, feeds the hungry, shelters the homeless, educates the young, welcomes refugees, and cares for the sick, both at home and abroad. We seek to work constructively with Congress and the Administration to promote policies that respect the life and dignity of all, care for those in need at home and abroad, and promote greater justice and peace in our nation and throughout the world.

In this unique moment, as legislators, you face weighty fiscal, economic and political choices. These choices are also profoundly moral, and they have enormous human consequences. In this effort, you will examine endless data, charts, and alternative budgets. Behind all those numbers are people we serve every day in our parishes, schools, hospitals, shelters and soup kitchens. The poorest and most vulnerable do not have powerful lobbyists, but they have the most compelling needs and a special claim on our individual consciences and national choices, especially in these times of massive joblessness, increasing poverty and growing hunger.

We understand that the fiscal status quo is unsustainable, with mounting deficits and growing debt for our children. It is essential to set clear priorities and work on a bipartisan basis to reduce future deficits. Growing debt affects all Americans, including those who are poor. Programs that help people meet their basic needs should not be disproportionately targeted for cuts at times of fiscal stress. We also recognize the economic and moral importance of creating jobs with decent wages and spurring economic growth as essential strategies to improve our economy, decrease poverty and reduce future deficits and debt. The question is how to fulfill the demands of justice and moral obligations to future generations while protecting the lives and dignity of those who are poor and vulnerable.

As teachers, we offer several moral criteria to help guide these difficult 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.

Based on our Catholic principles and everyday experience, a just framework for future budgets cannot rely on disproportionate cuts in essential services to poor and vulnerable persons. These programs need to be made more effective, efficient and responsive and we should work to strengthen and improve them on an ongoing basis. However, it would be wrong to balance future budgets by hurting those who already hurt the most by cutting programs such as foreign aid, affordable housing programs, child nutrition, or health care. A just framework also 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 fear the human and social costs of substantial cuts to programs that serve families working to make ends meet and escape poverty. These programs include: food and nutrition, child development and education, the Emergency Food and Shelter Program, and affordable housing programs. At a time of record foreclosures, increasing poverty and high unemployment it is not justifiable to weaken the national safety net or to make disproportionate cuts to programs that can help low and moderate income families avert crisis and live in dignity.

We especially fear the costs of undermining poverty-focused international assistance, which is an essential tool to promote human life and dignity, advance solidarity with poorer nations, and enhance global security. Substantial cuts to these programs would be devastating to many who struggle daily to survive and to find shelter, food and medicine. These cuts could result in the loss of innocent lives: persons with HIV no longer able to access life-saving anti-retroviral medications; victims of natural disaster succumbing to starvation and hunger-related illnesses; and poor families unable to grow food to feed themselves.

Cuts to funding for refugee admissions and overseas refugee assistance programs would have devastating effects on Afghan and Iraqi Special Immigrant Visa recipients, victims of torture and trafficking, unaccompanied alien children, and other vulnerable populations. These programs have historically been underfunded. Cuts to these services would affect not only these vulnerable populations but also the communities across our country that welcome them in their search for a better life.

The Catholic bishops of the United States stand ready to work with the Joint Select Committee and Congressional leaders to advance these policies and priorities, while disagreeing respectfully and civilly when they are threatened or undermined. The moral measure of this historic process is not which party wins or which powerful interests prevail, but rather how the jobless, hungry, homeless and poor are treated. On behalf of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, we offer our hopes and prayers that you and your colleagues on the Joint Select Committee can work together on a bipartisan basis to reduce future debt and deficits, promote human life and dignity, protect poor and vulnerable people and pursue the common good.

Sincerely,



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