



United States Conference of Catholic Bishops

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April 13, 2011

United States House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Representative:

On behalf of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, we write to address the moral and human dimensions of the ongoing budget debate and, in particular, the House Budget Resolution for Fiscal Year 2012. 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 bipartisan action which prevented a federal government shutdown and the hardship that would have come with failure to reach agreement. 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 congressionally 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 as well as 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 the proposals of the President and the Senate 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 retirement programs fairly. In this letter we do not offer a detailed critique of the entire budget before the House, but we ask you to consider the human and moral dimensions of several key choices facing the Congress.

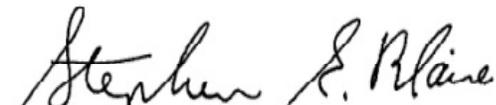
Access to affordable, life-affirming health care remains an urgent national priority. We are not opposed in principle to block grants, but fear that some proposed changes to Medicare and Medicaid could leave more elderly and poor people without the assurance of adequate and affordable health care. Medicaid block grants may offer states more flexibility, but could leave states with inadequate resources as costs grow or more people need health care in future recessions. Converting Medicare into a voucher program could shift rising health care costs to vulnerable seniors and those who are poor without controlling these costs. We also fear 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.

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 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 them. We support continuing reform of foreign assistance to make it 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 proposal before the House raises important and substantive issues for discussion, and at the same time raises serious concerns about how it meets 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,

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

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