



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

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November 13, 2012

United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Senator:

The Committee on Domestic Justice and Human Development and the Committee on International Justice and Peace of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops remain concerned about a wide range of issues in the public square, but at this time we address the moral and human dimensions of difficult federal budgetary choices as we face the imminent possibility of sequestration, and its negative impact on poor and vulnerable persons and families and the programs that help them. It is in our nation's best interest that Congress act in a bipartisan manner to address the impact of long-term deficits on the health of the economy and on future generations, and to use limited resources efficiently and effectively. However, this important goal must not be achieved at the expense of the dignity of poor and vulnerable people at home and abroad.

As Catholic bishops, we renew traditional principles and values to guide budgetary deliberations:

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 25:31-46). 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 a manner worthy of their dignity in difficult economic times.

While people of good will may disagree on how to apply these moral principles to specific policies, we believe it is incumbent on leaders to take these applications seriously and to offer concrete alternatives that meet the moral objectives stated above.

In *Caritas in Veritate*, Pope Benedict XVI warns against the "downsizing of social security systems" in rich and poor countries and emphasizes "solidarity with poor countries." We do not offer a detailed critique of various concrete proposals, but we ask Congress to weigh the human and moral consequences of various policy choices in light of the needs of people, especially those who are poor.

We have great concerns that sequestration would negatively affect many important domestic programs that meet the basic needs of people and communities in poverty. These programs have long been supported by our Conference as ways to implement basic principles of concern for poor persons. Drastic cuts to affordable housing and community development programs, child and maternal health initiatives, and workforce training would deprive millions of Americans of resources they depend on to live in a manner worthy of their human dignity. Although the economy shows some signs of recovery, there are still a record-high number of 46 million Americans living in poverty and about 12 million unemployed workers. According to some reports, the poverty rate would be nearly twice as high without the safety net in place. Programs such as **Section 8 housing vouchers**, the **Women, Infant and Children's (WIC) program**, and **community health centers** help to keep children and families with a roof over their heads, with food on the table, and in good health.

Educational services **for at-risk students** expand educational opportunities and participation of non-public schools, but public and non-public school students and their families would suffer from cuts:

Title I-A supports low-income students struggling academically and they would lose remedial tutoring services; **Title II-A** supports teachers' professional development; and **IDEA** supports students with disabilities.

Sequestration would also severely affect our country's **poverty-focused international assistance** programs that promote human life and dignity, advance solidarity with poorer nations, and enhances global stability and security. These programs, less than 1% of the budget, have always enjoyed bipartisan support. They save lives, treat and prevent disease, make farmers more productive, help orphans, feed victims of disasters, and protect refugees. The cuts envisioned in sequestration would mean 276,500 fewer people receiving HIV/AIDS treatment, potentially leading to 63,000 more deaths and 124,000 more orphans; and 656,000 fewer children having access to primary school, making their road to overcoming poverty that much steeper. The Conference does not support the entire foreign operations budget, but we strongly support poverty-focused international assistance, including Food for Peace, and ask Congress to protect and continue to reform international aid so it is even more effective for the poorest people in the poorest places on the planet.

In developing frameworks for future budgets, Congress should not rely on disproportionate cuts in essential services to poor persons. In budget deficit efforts there has always been a bipartisan consensus to exempt programs for the most vulnerable and instead to call for 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. To achieve savings, policy makers should consider cutting nuclear weapons programs, direct agricultural subsidies, and other unnecessary spending. Members of both parties have supported effective antipoverty programs that target assistance to people living in or near poverty, including but not limited to **the Earned Income Tax Credit, the Child Tax Credit, Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program (SNAP), and Pell Grants**. These and other programs that aid people in escaping poverty through education, training, and work should be protected from cuts. These initiatives reward work and allow families to live in dignity.

We appreciate how, through bipartisan agreement, Congress and the Administration protected low-income entitlement programs from sequestration. We urge that this principle be extended to all programs that respect and support the lives of poor persons at home and abroad. We continue to join with ecumenical partners in calling for a **"circle of protection"** around programs that serve our brothers and sisters who are poor and vulnerable in our nation and throughout the world. As you work to avoid sequestration and enact responsible deficit reduction that protects poor persons from cuts and future generations from unsustainable debts, we hope longstanding moral principles and values will inform your decisions.

We remind you that 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. The Catholic bishops of the United States stand ready to work with leaders of both parties for budget policies that reduce long-term unsustainable deficits, protect poor and vulnerable persons and families, expand educational and training opportunities, advance the common good, and promote human life and dignity.

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 Richard E. Pates
Bishop of Des Moines
Chairman, Committee on International Justice
and Peace