



Committee on Domestic Justice and Human Development

3211 FOURTH STREET NE • WASHINGTON DC 20017-1194 • 202-541-3160

WEBSITE: WWW.USCCB.ORG/JPHD • FAX 202-541-3339

May 2, 2016

United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Senator:

On December 1, 2015, I wrote to you expressing my deep concern that, though they bear little responsibility for the situation, “[t]he people of Puerto Rico are suffering from painful poverty and hunger, persistent joblessness, and other social problems, as a result of the financial crisis gripping the Commonwealth’s economy.” At that time, I urged support for legislation that would extend bankruptcy protection to Puerto Rico.

The suffering of these families has only deepened since last year, and anxiety grips the island due to further financial uncertainty and a feeling of powerlessness. Pope Francis has called upon all of us—leaders in every sector of society—to humanize our economic transactions and lending systems that “subject people to mechanisms which generate greater poverty, exclusion and dependence” (Address to the General Assembly of the United Nations, September 25, 2015).

While acknowledging that poor decision-making often plays a role in nations experiencing crippling debt, Saint John Paul II emphasized the truth that “it would be unjust to impose the burden resulting from these irresponsible decisions upon those who did not make them” (Apostolic Exhortation, *Ecclesia in America*, no. 22). Of course, Puerto Rico is not a separate nation. Her people are United States citizens, and leaders have an obligation to address their unique circumstances with urgency and justice. As Congress continues to seek answers, I ask you to look to these key moral principles for guidance:

- Respect for the Life and Dignity of the Human Person – All people are precious, made in the image and likeness of God, regardless of economic status. A critical measure of success in Puerto Rico will be how well solutions seek to protect human life and respect human dignity.

In the words of Saint John Paul II, “[w]ork constitutes a foundation for the formation of family life, which is a natural right and something that man is called to. . . . In a way, work is a condition for making it possible to found a family, since the family requires the means of subsistence which man normally gains through work” (*Laborem Exercens*, no. 10). Policies for Puerto Rico should honor the vital need for just wages and help maximize the value of every dollar (through incentives and tax policy) for those able to find employment, so that they may better provide for their families and build toward a healthier economy.

- Protection of the poor and vulnerable – The option for the poor calls us to give a priority concern, arising out of considerations of charity and justice, to the needs of the most vulnerable in economic, political, and social decisions. An understanding of our obligations must include the recognition that those who had no voice in contracting the debts, and who by and large derived no benefit from them, can be profoundly impacted by the choices made in resolving the problem. Impoverished families, particularly those with children, should be protected and assisted. Because of the disproportionate impact of environmental degradation on the poor, long-term environmental responsibility must also take precedence over near-term economic expediency.

Letter to United States Senate

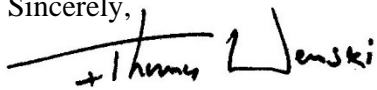
May 2, 2016

Page 2

- Participation and transparency – It is critical that people have a voice in decisions that touch their lives and human dignity demands transparency and the right of participation. Solutions in Puerto Rico ought not to be imposed from the outside, and should be sought in clear and open ways that involve the people of Puerto Rico themselves.
- The Common Good – The common good is the sum total of those conditions in society that make it possible for all persons to achieve their full potential. A moral assessment of debt policies must include consideration of the extent the debt burden undermines the ability of governments to fulfill their obligation to promote the common good, forcing them to spend their scarce resources on debt service rather than on critical investments in health, education, or care of those most in need. Ignoring these realities only ensures that root causes will remain unresolved, prolonging suffering and avoiding equitable long-term results. Legislation should ensure strong debt restructuring tools that bring Puerto Rico's total debt to sustainable levels while protecting critical government functions for the people.
- Solidarity – Solidarity calls for co-responsibility on the part of debtors and creditors in finding fair and workable solutions to this crisis, as part of a broader commitment to protect human life and respect human dignity. They are co-responsible not just because they may share the blame for the debt crisis in some measure, but because solidarity demands that those who have a capacity to resolve the crisis work together to find a just and effective solution within reasonable timeframes.
- Subsidiarity – The principle of subsidiarity recognizes that issues facing human beings should be addressed at the appropriate level of society with the capacity to do so. The community charged with acting should be willing and able to meet its obligations, and be respected by other levels of society in the collective work for the common good. Subsidiarity has a real significance in the current crisis. Individuals, the family, and voluntary associations are the building blocks of society. Ensuring that the needs of the most vulnerable are met requires the participation of civil society in decision-making processes around the debt issue. Every segment has a role to play, and policy ought to make space for each essential contribution.

The government of Puerto Rico's unique political status has made it difficult to fulfill adequately its obligation to ensure human needs are met and advance the common good. I urge you to work expeditiously toward solutions that honor the principles outlined above, so that Puerto Rico may move forward with dignity, transparency and the promise of a brighter future.

Sincerely,



Most Reverend Thomas G. Wenski
Archbishop of Miami
Chairman, Committee on Domestic Justice
and Human Development