



Department of Justice, Peace and Human Development

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April 22, 2013

U.S. Senate
Washington, D.C. 20510

Dear Senator:

As Chairmen of the Catholic bishops' Committees on Domestic Justice and Human Development and International Justice and Peace, we have been consistent and vocal in supporting the goal of reducing future unsustainable deficits, but that this must be pursued in ways that protect poor and vulnerable people at home and abroad. While we do not wish to offer a detailed critique of President Obama's entire Fiscal Year 2014 budget proposal at this time, we do wish to comment on a number of proposals that impact poverty and basic human needs.

As persistently high poverty and unemployment plague our nation, and war and crushing poverty tear families apart around the world, a just framework for future budgets cannot rely on disproportionate cuts to programs that help people live in a manner worthy of their human dignity. It demands a **“Circle of Protection”** around our brothers and sisters at home and abroad who are poor and vulnerable, and it requires shared sacrifice by all. This will include raising adequate revenues, eliminating unnecessary military and other spending, and addressing the long-term costs of health insurance and retirement programs fairly.

As Catholic pastors, we continue to emphasize that while these choices may seem merely economic and political, they have clear moral and human consequences. We offer the following timeless moral criteria to guide you in the decisions that lie ahead:

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.

While we acknowledge that raising adequate revenue is a necessary component of responsible deficit reduction, how the country accomplishes that is just as important. Placing limits on some personal income tax deductions could unintentionally harm charitable giving by eroding or eliminating, in some cases, the value of the charitable tax deduction. 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. An effort to raise revenue for important human needs programs that harms other organizations' efforts to provide similar services is counterproductive.

The President should be commended for his concern for those living in or near poverty, especially children and families. Investing in parental options for early childhood education; capitalizing the National Housing Trust Fund; reforming child support and fatherhood initiatives to encourage noncustodial fathers' reengagement in children's lives; and increasing mental health services for youth, families, service members, and veterans will all strengthen the family unit, the fundamental cell of society. We also support making permanent recent improvements in the Earned Income and Child Tax Credits. These credits decrease child poverty, support family formation, and encourage employment.

We caution that reforms to vital health and retirement programs like Medicare, Medicaid, and Social Security must not increase poverty or economic hardship among the populations they are supposed to help. There are policy options that have the potential to raise adequate revenues for these programs while protecting beneficiaries, and we challenge you to explore those options. We warn against shifting costs to or diminishing the benefits of vulnerable seniors, people with disabilities, and those who are poor. We will continue to address the morally problematic features of health care reform rather than working to repeal the law.

We appreciate the Administration's continued commitment to poverty-focused international assistance. Congress should ensure robust funding for HIV/AIDS, maternal and child health, and other humanitarian and development programs. The President's proposal includes significant changes to Food for Peace that give implementing agencies greater flexibility and end monetization, reforms we have long sought. We urge care, however, to ensure that funding is sustained long term.

Likewise, we appreciate and support the President's request for assistance to refugee populations, including funding for the Migration and Refugee Assistance (MRA) account and the Emergency Migration and Refugee Assistance (ERMA) account. We ask that you improve upon his request but, at a minimum, preserve the proposed levels.

The President's proposal moves Food for Peace funding allocated for food needs during emergencies to International Disaster Assistance (IDA) while substantially cutting existing IDA programs. The proposed reductions are deeply troubling, especially as humanitarian needs grow in places like Syria. Congress should reject these cuts in shelter and medical assistance to very vulnerable populations.

The President proposes cuts to the nuclear Global Threat Reduction Initiative, as nuclear proliferation threats multiply, at the same time increasing funding for nuclear modernization programs. We oppose these shifts. Investing in nuclear weapons systems undercuts the long-term goal of working for a world free from nuclear weapons.

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* teaches that one of the responsibilities of public authority is to advance the common good, and that "it should make accessible to each what is needed to lead a truly human life: food, clothing, health, work, education and culture, suitable information, the right to establish a family, and so on" (No. 1908).

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, and 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,

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

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