
REMAPPING DEBATE

Asking "Why" and "Why Not"

Two-tier motality? Catholic Bishops' anti-poverty advocacy lags

Original Reporting | By Kevin C. Brown | Poverty, Religion

May 16, 2012 — In a statement earlier this month, Cardinal Timothy M. Dolan, the Archbishop of New York and the current president of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB), joined other bishops in the state in [calling on the legislature](#) to increase New York's minimum wage. They argued that many workers who earn the state minimum wage (currently \$7.25 per hour) are "on the brink of homelessness" and that raising that wage "is a matter of justice and fairness."

Dolan and the New York bishops' sentiments echo some of those found in the USCCB's "[Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship: A Call for Political Responsibility](#)," its quadrennial statement to the Catholic electorate on political participation in the U.S. In the introduction to the most recent edition, released in October 2011, the USCCB pointed out that the 2008 economic crisis and slow recovery have each exacerbated issues of "unemployment, poverty, and hunger," and noted that Catholics had a duty to consider policies – and politicians – that "protect those who are poor and vulnerable."

Inquiry by Remapping Debate into the activities of the USCCB, however, has found that, in recent years, the strength of the USCCB's anti-poverty advocacy does not, in general, match the rhetoric. Does the fight against poverty have second-class status within the USCCB?

A powerful force

Where it chooses to exert itself, the USCCB can be quite powerful. Last month, TIME Magazine even named Cardinal Dolan one of the "100 most influential people in the world." And it is easy to see why. Last fall, under his direction, the USCCB kicked off its "religious liberty" campaign, arguing that forces in American culture were in "a drive to neuter religion." Since the start of that campaign, Dolan and the USCCB succeeded in pressuring President Obama to exempt religiously-affiliated institutions, such as hospitals and universities, from the Affordable Care Act requirement that employers cover the cost of oral contraceptives as part of health insurance plans offered to their employees (religious institutions themselves had already been exempt).

It is true that the Bishops' Conference does "write letters to the Hill," and "issue press releases" condemning cuts to programs for the poor, as they did in March to oppose the House Budget Committee's proposed cuts in food stamps, Medicaid, and other low income assistance programs. But, according to Father Thomas Reese, a fellow at the Woodstock Theological Center at Georgetown University and a

scholar of the Catholic Church, “there is not the real muscle that’s put behind these.” Over the last two years at the USCCB semi-annual meetings, Reese pointed out incredulously, “The issue of unemployment, the issue of poverty, the fact that we are in a recession, for God’s sake, did not come up.” A review of press releases from the USCCB from this period confirms Reese’s charge: economic justice issues were not a material part of the agenda of the meetings.

“Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship” frames the forming of political judgments as a tension between two kinds of issues: those, like poverty, that require “affirmative efforts to seek the common good,” and those, like abortion and euthanasia, that represent “intrinsic evils that can never be supported.”

Faithful Citizenship, meanwhile, frames the forming of political judgments as a tension between two kinds of issues: those, like poverty, that require “affirmative efforts to seek the common good,” and those, like abortion and euthanasia, that represent “intrinsic evils that can never be supported.” This conceptual division appeared in Faithful Citizenship for the first time in 2007.

Since poverty, though an explicit concern, is not treated as an “intrinsic evil,” and since Faithful Citizenship cautions Catholics against treating “all issues as equal,” the two-tier system of assessing moral challenges has had, as a practical matter, a pernicious effect, according to David Hollenbach, a Jesuit theologian at Boston College. “The status of abortion and homosexuality and stem cell research issues and so forth [have been elevated] to a level of discussion,” says Hollenbach, “in a way that I think is inappropriately stressing those issues above the broad range of issues that really need to be dealt with,” including poverty.

Providing charity versus making change

One way to deal with poverty is to help make the lives of people in poverty less harsh through charitable works. Another is to advocate for structural changes in public policy that would reduce the prevalence of poverty. It is the first strategy on which the Catholic Church in the U.S. focuses extensive time, money, and effort, and those efforts are often cited in response to criticism that the USCCB could be doing more on poverty. When, for example, Remapping Debate asked Father Robert Grecco, the pastor at Sacred Heart Roman Catholic Church in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania if he thought the USCCB could do more on poverty, he replied: “I’d have to disagree with those things, because we also have the Catholic charities...The church is at the forefront, because we have the means and the facilities. So I would say we’re taking care of the poor.” He explained that his parish participates in running a food bank, provides assistance with utilities and furnishing homes, among other charitable outlets. Remapping Debate followed up and asked about whether the USCCB could be more effective in advocating public policy, Father Grecco replied: “Particular priests who don’t think the bishops have done enough [on poverty] tend to have ... a more liberal political view, and would spend less time being concerned about abortion than they are about other things, and for us, abortion is a key issue of life.”

Nationally, charitable social service activities, which are run through parishes like Sacred Heart, add up. In 2010, the most recent year for which data are available, Catholic Charities USA estimates that it provided assistance to over 10.2 million unique individuals around the country, with services including soup kitchens, food pantries, and mental health counseling. The Catholic Campaign for Human Development, which is directly controlled by the USCCB, meanwhile continues to award grants (nearly \$8 million during its 2010-2011 grant cycle) for community self-help projects and educates people about poverty in America as it has since its founding in 1969.

These and other Catholic groups, as Fred Rotondaro, chair of the board of directors of Catholics in Alliance for the Common Good, and a fellow at the Center for American Progress, pointed out, “do wonderful things for the poor, they do marvelous things. But what they do is alleviate the suffering; what the Bishops have failed to do is attack the causes of poverty in America.” For Catholic social justice advocates like Rotondaro, charity of the kind defined by Father Grecco is essential, but needs to be complimented with advocacy for justice in the political realm by the USCCB leadership.

This year, said Kathy Saile, director of USCCB’s Office of Domestic Social Development, “as legislative opportunities arrive they [the Bishops] will insert themselves and engage themselves in that process,” especially in response to potential cuts to food stamps and the child tax credit.”

How much advocacy?

Currently, the USCCB does advocate on federal poverty and social safety net-related legislation, with a staff of five, through its Domestic Social Development office (The Pro-Life Activities office, by contrast, has a staff of eight.) Kathy Saile, the director of the Office of Domestic Social Development at the USCCB, argued to Remapping Debate that USCCB lobbying efforts last summer, during the fight over raising the country’s debt ceiling, were influential in protecting programs for the poor from being included among the budget cuts that will automatically go into effect if Congress does not find other means of deficit reduction before January 2013. During the debate, several bishops, including Stephen Blaire, chairman of the USCCB’s Committee on Domestic Justice and Human Development, met with Republican and Democratic Party leaders in both the House and Senate to make the case for exempting low-income programs from this “sequestration” procedure.

This year, Saile said, “as legislative opportunities arrive they [the Bishops] will insert themselves and engage themselves in that process,” especially in response to potential cuts to food stamps and the child tax credit. When Remapping Debate asked if the efforts pursued by her office are essentially reactive, rather than constituting a broad, affirmative strategy to fight poverty, she replied, “I mean the Catholic Bishops don’t set the agenda for Congress.” The larger principles and social justice ideas — “the big picture,” as Saile describes it — come from a second front in the USCCB’s advocacy: Bishop’s letters.

Bishop Blaire, in his role chair of the domestic justice committee, has sent several such letters since early March to all representatives and senators in Congress, as well as to the heads of committees that have control over specific pieces of legislation. Blaire’s volley of letters anticipated, and then responded to, the House Budget Committee’s proposed cuts to low-income programs, that, if enacted, would total over 3.3 trillion over ten years, according to the [Center on Budget and Policy Priorities](#). The tenor of all the letters reflected, as Blaire told Remapping Debate, the fact that “these are difficult times when we are trying to find financial adjustments for our country, but we want to raise up the importance of not doing this on the backs of the poor.”

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In his letter of Mar. 6, for example, Blaire along with his counterpart Bishop Richard Pates, the chairman of the USCCB’s Committee on International Justice and Peace, wrote: “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 in these debates, but they have the most compelling moral claim on our consciences and our common resources.” Following through on these moral commitments, Blaire and Pates reasoned, may require “raising adequate revenues, eliminating unnecessary military and other spending, and addressing the long-term costs of health insurance and retirement programs fairly.”

Though Steve Krueger, the national director of the Catholic Democrats supports the letters sent by Blaire, he points to an incident in the spring of 2011, when, having received a [similar letter](#) from Bishop Blaire and Bishop Howard J. Hubbard, Rep. Paul Ryan (R-Wisc.), the chair of the House Budget Committee,

sent a response, not to Blaire and Hubbard, but to USCCB president and then-Archbishop Timothy Dolan. Ryan [forcefully rejected](#) the thrust of the recommendations, arguing that his budget proposal was dedicated to “end[ing] the mortal threat of exploding [federal] debt,” a task requiring significant cuts to “entitlement spending,” like Medicare and Medicaid. Dolan replied with a conciliatory [letter](#) that, while mentioning the “specific concerns” of Blaire and Hubbard, suggested that within Catholic principles, “people of good will might offer and emphasize various policy proposals that reflect their experience and expertise.” Rather than standing with his USCCB colleagues, Krueger says, Dolan’s letter undercut the force of Blaire and Hubbard’s initial advocacy. Ryan, at least, found the letter supportive: the House Budget Committee still has a copy of both the Ryan and Dolan letters posted on its website.

Though Dolan’s office did not return repeated requests for comment on this article (see bottom box on page seven called “Missing Voices”), Kathy Saile defended Dolan by saying that a letter he sent to bishops last September urging “the Bishops and the Clergy to be leaders in their own communities

to overcome poverty” was a marker of Dolan’s commitment and leadership on poverty advocacy. To Krueger, however, “Cardinal Dolan has given us a mixed message.” Instead of reasserting that the Ryan budget was inconsistent with Catholic social teaching, Krueger says, Dolan “left the interpretation as to whether the Ryan budget was in conformance with Catholic social teaching open to question.” That is one reason that Krueger characterizes the force of the Bishops’ collective voice on anti-poverty advocacy as “uninspired and tentative at best.”

The road not taken (any more)

The USCCB’s own history provides insight into how it could advocate more strongly on poverty in ways that combined both the concerted media attention and engagement with Catholics in the pews identified as fruitful avenues to pursue by contemporary critics of the USCCB. In November 1986, after over two years of hearings and three drafts, the Bishops’ Conference released “[Economic Justice for All](#),” a more than 100 page pastoral letter on the U.S. economy, which confronted squarely the challenges to social justice during the Reagan era. When the Bishops released the first draft of the letter, a New York Times article [noted](#) that unlike Josef Stalin — who famously disparaged the influence of the Catholic Church with the quip, “The Pope! How many divisions has he got?” — “Today nobody is likely to make the mistake of dismissing the [Bishops’ Conference’s] potential influence on United States economic policy.”

Economic Justice for All argued that “the market system contributes to the success of the U.S. economy; but so do many efforts to forge economic institutions and public policies that enable all to share in the riches of the nation.” It called, among other things, for increases in the minimum wage, a more progressive tax structure, and further support for Social Security and Medicaid.

Father Fred Kammer is the director of the Jesuit Social Research Institute at Loyola University in New Orleans. From 1990 to 1992, he worked on health and welfare issues for the USCCB and, from 1992 to 2001, he served as president and chief executive officer of Catholic Charities USA. Kammer says that a significant part of the influence of Economic Justice for All came not simply from its release, but through the extended focus on poverty issues achieved by the bishops in the course of conducting lengthy hearings held with experts around the country while developing the document. The protracted process of producing the document, according to Kammer, engaged Catholics and other Americans in a conversation about economic justice: “a lot of education took place by virtue of having the drafts out” and circulating in the press, he says.

“Cardinal Dolan has given us a mixed message,” said Steve Krueger, national director of the Catholic Democrats, adding that the Bishops’ collective voice on anti-poverty advocacy has been “tentative and uninspired at best.”

More concretely, Kammer recalled, “After they did the letter, they set up an implementation office for three years, and that office put out bulletin paragraphs, to try and get the thing into a form where a pastor could just drop the thing into his bulletin, ... they put out slideshows, they put out materials for parishes, materials for schools.” Within weeks of the release of the final draft, state-level bishops’ organizations also began making specific recommendations to their legislatures, and by December 1986 the Maryland bishops had already called for parish priests in the state to devote the third Sunday of advent to preaching about Economic Justice for All.

Other potential steps

In a conversation with Remapping Debate, Bishop Stephen Blaire, who chairs the Committee on Domestic Justice and Human Development at the USCCB, admitted both that the USCCB could be doing more on poverty advocacy, and that “we don’t promote it, to make it known as well as we should about all that is [already] being done.” Alongside Blaire, Catholic social justice advocates and theologians explained specific ways that the Bishops’ Conference could do more to advocate for the poor and pointed to USCCB’s own history to suggest its capacity to reach out on poverty issues.

Getting poverty to be taken seriously in the media might be more difficult for the USCCB than getting a hearing for its religious liberty drive, in part because “when you are raising fundamental questions of economic justice, the [corporate media] system might be much more inclined to ignore that.” — Professor Vincent Miller of the University of Dayton

Asked how USCCB could do more on poverty, John Gehring, senior writer and Catholic outreach coordinator at Faith in Public Life, an inter-faith organization that seeks to mobilize religious communities and shape public debate around “common good” issues, told Remapping Debate that he would like to see “more than letters sent to the Hill, I would like to see the Bishops call for a national campaign ... to address income inequality.” Other Catholic social justice advocates identified particular strategies for advocating for the poor that could fit under such a campaign, including some avenues already being deployed by the USCCB in its existing “religious liberty” campaign.

First, critics argue that the USCCB could use the media much more effectively in talking about poverty. Vincent Miller, a professor of theology at the University of Dayton, put it simply: “The Bishops can make a story if they want to.” According to both Miller and John Gehring, the leadership of the Bishops’ Conference should be out in the media talking about economic justice, while vocally and directly challenging Catholic Republicans, like Rep. Paul Ryan, who they say distort Church teaching on economic matters.

Miller acknowledges that getting poverty to be taken seriously in the media might be more difficult for the USCCB than getting a hearing for its religious liberty drive, in part because “when you are raising fundamental questions of economic justice, the [corporate media] system might be much more inclined to ignore that.” The USCCB would have to “take that problem seriously and push very hard against it.”

Missing voices: USCCB officials who declined to speak

Our article includes reporting based on conversations with Bishop Stephen Blaire, chairman of the USCCB’s Domestic Justice and Human Development Committee, and Kathy Saile, the director of USCCB’s Domestic Social Development office. Many other officials, not just Cardinal Dolan, declined to engage in a dialog about the role and status of anti-poverty efforts within the USCCB.

Among those to whom Remapping Debate reached out via telephone and email were Archbishop Joseph Kurtz and Bishops Michael Bransfield and George V. Murray, each an official of the USCCB; several members of the Domestic Justice and Human Development Committee, some of whom deferred to Bishop Blaire to comment as chairman of the committee; and several members of the USCCB’s Ad Hoc Committee for Religious Liberty, including Cardinal Donal Wuerl and Archbishops Charles Chaput, Wilton D. Gregory, and Thomas Rodi. When these officials were unresponsive or said to be unavailable, we followed up with specific questions (see below). Unfortunately, we received no substantive replies.

- Currently, the USCCB is pursuing its religious liberty campaign by utilizing the media and directly connecting with parishioners through the “Fortnight of Freedom.” Could similar strategies be pursued in advocating for the poor?
- Do you agree that the important work of providing charity to and for the poor (I have statistics on the impressive array of programs that exist) is not a sufficient response to fighting poverty, but that advocacy to undo structures that perpetuate or fail to eliminate poverty must also be tackled?
- What else could the USCCB do on the anti-poverty advocacy front?
- Do the substance of the 1986 “Economic Justice for All” pastoral letter and the campaigns in support of that letter provide useful guidance for anti-poverty advocacy today?
- Isn’t it fair to say that that there is not as much energy of the sort devoted to “Economic Justice for All” being devoted to anti-poverty advocacy today? If not, what is the evidence of equal or greater effort?
- “Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship” describes certain policies and practices as “intrinsic evils”. Why are actions by officials and governments that foster or perpetuate poverty not considered to be intrinsic evils?
- As a practical matter, do both clergy and laity assign a lower priority to issues not in the “intrinsic evil” category than those that are?
- Hasn’t the USCCB spent more time, energy, and money on intrinsic evil issues [including abortion and stem cell research] than on anti-poverty advocacy in the last few years?

Still, the success of Father Thomas Reese’s recent campaign at Georgetown University shows the potential of such a media strategy. In the run-up to a scheduled speech by Paul Ryan at the school last month, Reese was able to assemble a letter signed by 88 faculty condemning Ryan’s budget proposal for diverging from Catholic social teaching. Reese’s campaign received significant play in newspapers and [on television](#).

Reaching out directly to the pews

Second, the USCCB has another large audience, one to be found in the pews across the United States. Fred Rotondaro suggests that “the biggest thing they could do is educate the catholic laity and educate the public about the extent of poverty in this country...They can do this in Sunday mass.” Indeed, this past January, many Bishops, as part of the religious liberty campaign, [followed the lead](#) provided by [Cardinal Dolan’s video statement on the USCCB website](#), and issued letters to be read at mass in parishes across the country denouncing the requirement that health insurance plans cover oral contraceptives.

Reaching out directly to the pews through a national campaign may be especially important because, according to Kammer, staffers and pastors at the diocesan and parish level can, in the face of an array of duties and ongoing communications, lose focus on anti-poverty advocacy.

Connecting with people in the pews also has the potential to turn Catholics into a visible presence at anti-poverty protests in Washington. Patrick Carolan, the executive director of the Franciscan Action Network, a group that represents Franciscans in the U.S. and advocates especially on social justice and peace issues, pointed to how Catholic parishes across the country have contributed greatly to the attendance at the annual anti-abortion “March for Life” rally in Washington, and said that he would “like to see the Bishops use their prophetic voice to get every parish to get buses to come up to Washington, D.C. and really stand in front of the capitol...protesting these cuts that are happening to the poor.”

The “biggest thing [the Bishops] could do is educate the catholic laity and educate the public about the extent of poverty in this country...They can do this in Sunday mass.” — Fred Rotondaro, Catholics in Alliance for the Common Good

At the next Bishops’ Conference meeting, this June in Atlanta, Georgia, Bishop Blaire’s committee is bringing the issue of poverty before the Conference, looking for approval from the body to create something that is “not just another statement” but a “document that creates interactive engagement.” Bishop Blaire stressed to Remapping Debate that he is not proposing to recreate the length and breadth of Economic Justice for All due to the intense amount of research, input, and time involved in creating

that document. Instead, he hopes the Conference can create a document that “puts more emphasis on interaction, creating questions for local groups, [explaining] how to engage your local officials, and raising up some of the key principles in our Catholic social teaching,” all elements that made the 1986 document so important.

Economic Justice for All turned 25 years old last November, and according to Steve Krueger, “there is no question” that the USCCB “spoke out much more vigorously, much more unambiguously...25 and 15 years ago than they are today” on poverty issues. Thomas Reese, who has written extensively on the history of the Bishops’ Conference, argues that the shift in the Bishops’ focus is rooted in the fact that today, basically, “it’s a whole new different group of bishops.”

This content originally appeared at <http://www.remappingdebate.org/node/1273>