

THE ROLE OF ETHICAL STANDARDS IN SHAPING STATE AND NATIONAL BUDGETS

by Sr. Brenda Walsh, Racine Dominican

When I listen to the debates that surround the Annual Budget decisions at various levels, I wonder if there are any common ethical standards in creating them. If so, how do we name them?

At a recent Social Ministry gathering in D.C., representing some church leaders, they discussed the blizzard of debates on how to solve the budget deficit nationally and statewide. Over the years, faith communities and social service leaders have named some ethical standards. One policy is clear – The budget deficit must not be solved on the backs of the poor and most vulnerable members of our society. They are the ones who suffer the most from legislative posturing and bickering that has reached a pitch beyond all we have experienced in recent times.

Some cuts proposed at state and national levels at this time only increase and deepen the problems. Also, the attempt to take away the power of the workers to have a legitimate voice in ensuring safe working conditions, just wages and benefits denies basic principles that honor the dignity of work and the workers and promote economic fairness. Fr. Bryan Massingale, SJ, reminds us that Ministers from various denominations and great civic leaders such as Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Cesar Chavez and Rabbi Joshua Heschel supported Bargaining Rights to protect the human dignity of the workers and maintain fairness in the workplace.

Some decisions made regarding the budgets in areas such as education, health care, job creation and other human needs affect all people. For example, if we reduce the number of teachers and have less schools, this will only add to the deficit in the future. The growing number of families with children living in poverty will need better schools, smaller class sizes and more resources to prepare them for jobs in the future. President Obama suggests strong support for education. Without adequate educational resources, we will be building more prisons and have more living in poverty. Likewise, cutting back on programs for the aging population will only leave more people in dire poverty. We realize that something has to be done in face of such a large deficit. In all programs we need to practice fiscal responsibility. What we do and how we do it will make all the difference.

We need to take a good look at the growing social needs and see where and how they fit into the total picture. We need to work together to find the best and most effective way to solve the problem and meet human needs. One major decision could be to find alternative ways to solve international conflicts and not consider war as the first solution. It only adds to the conflict and takes a great toll on the human race. The money used on wars and preparation for wars could make a great difference in providing for the basic human needs named above. Can we ask the millionaires and billionaires and major corporations to contribute to the debt reduction rather than finding ways to provide tax breaks for the rich?

All of these are shared responsibilities that will call for more cooperation and adjustment of some of our values. If we are fair and fiscally responsible we can accomplish our goals to honor and respect the human dignity of all people. This transcends wrangling and political debate in order to build strong, healthy and productive communities for all people.

Let us continue the journey with courage and hope.