

Reflections October 2012

We can credit vice presidential candidate Paul Ryan for introducing Catholic social teaching into the current political discussion. In an address at Georgetown University last April, he warned of “a gathering storm” caused by our “ever-growing national debt” that has produced “ever-shrinking opportunity for Americans young and old.” In response to the recent financial crisis, we needed “to strengthen the foundations of our free enterprise economy, but instead the White House and the last Congress exploited the crisis to advance a government-centered society – a massively expanded role for the federal government in our lives.” He extolled his own budget proposal, passed by the House, which would “lift the debt and free the nation from the constraints of ever-expanding government.” To justify his position, Ryan invoked his Catholic faith and the social teaching of the Church: “The work I do as a Catholic holding office conforms to the social doctrine as best as I can make of it.” More specifically, he defended his budget proposal on the grounds that it incorporates Catholic teaching on “subsidiarity by returning power to individuals, to families and to communities.”

Representative Ryan’s understanding of subsidiarity reflects the interpretation advanced by George Weigel and other neo-conservatives who use the principle of subsidiarity as a justification for restricting the role of the state in ordering civil society and

promoting an unfettered free market. They emphasize that part of Catholic social teaching which insists that human needs are best met by local initiatives and intermediate groups such as families, churches and neighborhood associations. To function effectively, these groups must be free from government interference. For neo-conservatives, “only an open, free market allows such intermediate bodies economic breathing space.”

Paul Ryan’s economic proposals have prompted strong criticisms from various segments of the Catholic community. In an open letter to Congress, the American bishops insisted that the Ryan budget fails to meet the moral criteria of Catholic social teaching. They put this judgment in context: “A just framework for future budgets cannot rely on disproportionate cuts in essential services to poor persons; it requires 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.”

A group of Georgetown professors also sent a letter to Rep. Ryan challenging his “continuing misuse of Catholic teaching to defend a budget plan that decimates food programs for struggling families, radically weakens protection for the elderly and sick, and gives more tax breaks to the wealthiest few.” They accused Ryan of “profoundly misreading” Church teaching on subsidiarity, which is not “a free pass to dismantle government programs and abandon the poor to their own devices.” Subsidiarity does call

“for solutions to be enacted as close to the level of local communities as possible,” but it also “demands that higher levels of government provide help – ‘*subsidium*’– when communities and local governments face problems beyond their means to address such as economic crises, high unemployment, endemic poverty and hunger.”

One of the more publicized criticisms of the Ryan budget has come from Network, an organization of Catholic sisters that lobbies Congress on behalf of social justice. Sr. Simone Campbell, executive director of Network, criticized the budget passed by the House, because it would “slash funding for programs that serve people in need while giving bigger tax breaks to the wealthy.” Network was especially appalled by Ryan’s claim that his budget reflects Catholic teaching. Campbell insisted that this is “emphatically not true,” while noting the bishops’ position that “programs that help people in poverty must be protected.” Responding to the gospel summons to challenge injustice, Network organized “Nuns on the Bus,” a 2,700 mile bus tour through nine states designed to connect with people who would suffer from the proposed budget cuts and to amplify the voices opposed to the Ryan budget.

Progressive theologians, as well, have challenged the neo-conservative interpretation of the traditional Catholic teaching on subsidiarity. In a July 30, 2012 article in *America* entitled “Saving Subsidiarity,” Vince Miller, who teaches at the University of Dayton, made

the case that subsidiarity cannot be legitimately reduced to a principle of “small government.” It has, rather, a two-fold function: to protect against government and other powerful social institutions taking over the proper function of smaller local agencies; and to encourage the state to empower intermediate organizations, such as the family, community groups, unions and businesses, to contribute to the common good.

Historically, Catholic social thought developed the principle of subsidiarity in response to the rise of the modern secular state and the development of capitalist economies, which magnified the need for mediating organizations, such as charitable associations and unions, to help those left powerless and in need. Responding to the new social situation, Pope Pius XI wrote his 1931 encyclical *“Quadragesimo Anno”* that included the seminal teaching on subsidiarity. On the one hand, Pius insisted that it is an injustice and violation of right order “to take from individuals what they can accomplish by their own initiative and industry” and “to assign to a greater and higher association what lesser and subordinate organizations can do.” The government should “let subordinate groups handle matters of concern of lesser importance.” On the other hand, the pope recognized that “many things which were done by small associations in former times cannot be done now save by larger associations.” There are some things only the state can do, such as “directing, watching, urging, restraining” the various intermediate bodies that constitute civil society. Furthermore, Pius insisted that “the right order of economic life cannot be left

to a free competition of forces,” implying that the government has a legitimate role in regulating the economic life of society. Based on this classic teaching of Pope Pius XI, Vince Miller concluded that subsidiarity cannot be legitimately used to argue for small government that allows the market to regulate itself. More accurately, subsidiarity demands an appropriate, properly scaled role for government that encourages and empowers economic and social institutions to serve the common good. To support his case, Miller quoted Pope Benedict XVI: “Economic activity cannot solve all social problems through the simple application of commercial logic. This needs to be directed towards the pursuit of the common good, for which the political community in particular must also take responsibility.”

Other papal encyclicals have likewise embraced this two-fold thrust of the principle of subsidiarity. In his 1961 encyclical *“Mater et Magistra,”* Pope John XXIII noted that the modern world requires that public officials intervene “in a wide variety of economic affairs,” including serious problems such as “mass unemployment,” in order to promote the common good. At the same time, the government must “not only avoid restricting the freedom of private citizens, but also increase it, so long as the basic rights of each individual citizen are preserved inviolate” (n 54). In his 1991 encyclical *“Centessimus Annus,”* Pope John Paul II invoked the principle of subsidiarity to warn against the excesses of the welfare state that deprive smaller societal agencies of their proper and more effective role (n 48). In

that same section, the pope recognized proper tasks of the government in the economic sphere: providing security and stability; overseeing and protecting the exercise of human rights; and even intervening, for a limited time, when, for example, monopolies create obstacles to achieving the common good.

Finally, *The Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, published by the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace in 2004, has a valuable section summarizing church teachings on the principle of subsidiarity (n 185-191). Subsidiarity, which is “a most important principle of social philosophy” and is “among the most constant and characteristic directives of the Church’s social doctrine,” demands that the state respect the dignity of persons, support the proper role of intermediate social groupings, and provide help when needed for these groups to flourish. “One may think, for example, of situations in which it is necessary for the State itself to stimulate the economy because it is impossible for civil society to support initiatives on its own” (n 188). In general, respect and care for the common good “must remain the criteria for making decisions concerning the application of the principle of subsidiarity.”

This brief survey of Catholic teaching on subsidiarity makes it clear that the principle cannot be legitimately used as a direct argument for small government and for reducing restrictions on our market economy, as Paul Ryan claimed in his Georgetown lecture. By the

same token, subsidiarity cannot directly specify the precise function of the state in the economic and cultural life of the country.

The principle of subsidiarity does provide a balanced framework for a civil conversation on the appropriate role of the government in society. It does serve as a much needed reminder that all social institutions should work together for the common good. It does promote active participation of all citizens, acting individually and in association with others, in the cultural, economic, political and social life of the country, always with the public good in mind. The principle does suggest proper tasks of government: for example, helping intermediate groupings to flourish and work together for the good of all; and regulating large institutions, such as multinational corporations and labor unions, so they do not harm individuals and society. In summary, subsidiarity, as articulated by Catholic social teaching, can help frame the important national debate on the role of government in civic life, but only if we honor both its functions that serve the common good and reject efforts to turn it into a one-sided defense of small government and an unregulated market.