



The Washington State Catholic Conference (WSCC) represents the Catholic Bishops of Washington State: Archbishop J. Peter Sartain of the Archdiocese of Seattle; Bishop Blase J. Cupich of the Diocese of Spokane; Bishop Joseph J. Tyson of the Diocese of Yakima; and Bishop Eusebio Elizondo, Auxiliary Bishop of the Archdiocese of Seattle.

These reflections are offered to help frame discussions addressing the economic issues facing our state and nation at this time. We do not endorse any specific action plan, nor do we indicate how people should vote in upcoming elections. Our aim is simply to bring the light of Catholic Social Teaching and our tradition to this discussion, so that Washington State residents and legislators will respond equitably to the needs of the most vulnerable. Our desire is to help society work for the good of all.

Seeking the Common Good

Meghan is a single mother with two children living in Federal Way. She was laid off when her company downsized and has been unable to find full time employment. She is at risk of losing her home, and worries about being able to provide for her children. Carlos, his wife Maria and their children live in Zillah. Carlos is a farm worker and does not receive health care benefits. He and Maria rely on the state's Basic Health Plan and their children are on Apple Heath for Kids. Darrell is homeless and living in Spokane. He has mild schizophrenia and his mental health treatment and medications are state funded. All are fearful about the future.

The Challenge We and Our Leaders Face

We are in the midst of very difficult economic times. The 2011-13 Washington State budget included devastating reductions to the "safety net" programs, such as cuts in the Basic Health Plan, mental health, drug and alcohol services, and housing assistance programs. Even though billions of dollars have already been slashed in the state budget, more budget cuts will be necessary to address the looming revenue shortfall of nearly \$2 billion. Unemployment remains high and the demand for social services continues to grow. Our leaders are once again confronted with the complex task of determining the appropriate level of government services and the amount of revenue necessary to address the needs of Washingtonians.



More Than an Issue of Economics

The budget and revenue issues that Washington faces are serious and must be equitably addressed through budget cuts and tax reform. Yet, the

challenges before us are about more than just economics. There is also an important moral component to them which now, more than ever,

cannot be overlooked. We must approach our decision making with clarity of thought, balanced inquiry, and attention to key moral principles which raise significant questions: *Who is responsible for the care of the most vulnerable members of society? What is the role of government in ensuring the common good? What is the role of individuals and charitable organizations? What is a fair and equitable way to share these responsibilities through a just distribution of income and wealth?*

There are no easy answers to these questions, but our response to them will determine the character of our society and the kind of state we will be. We owe it to ourselves to carefully apply a moral compass in charting the direction we take.

The Light of Catholic Social Teaching

Key principles of Catholic Social Teaching offer valuable insight to inform our discussion and decisions and their effect on the common good of society.

The Common Good: In their 1986 Pastoral Letter *Economic Justice for All*, the Bishops of the United States wrote that "human justice can be realized and protected only in community." Human beings need the bonds of community to truly flourish. Indeed, we are our brother's and sister's keeper - a truth that reminds us that the good of one is connected to the good of all.



Subsidiarity: Some social problems can be addressed at the individual or community level, while other issues can be addressed only at a higher level such as the government acting on behalf of all. Charitable and volunteer groups make important contributions to the common good, but some challenges need government resources.

Distributive Justice: Some residents lack the basic necessities of life - a condition of inequality which harms the common good and cannot be morally justified (*Tax Reform and the Poor*, Pastoral Letter of the U.S. Catholic Bishops, 1989). Distributive justice is not about arbitrarily “spreading the wealth around.” Rather, it focuses on instances of extreme inequities in the availability of income and wealth and seeks to ensure that both resources and tax responsibilities are distributed justly and fairly to bring balance to the system.



Progressivity: The principle of progressivity holds that tax assessments should consider the level of pay earned by individuals and families, so that a disproportionate amount of their income does not go to meeting tax obligations.

Some Observations and Reflections

Using these principles as our framework, the WSCC proposes the following points for your consideration:

- The starting point in making decisions in this critical moment is the promotion of the common good. The first step is to identify the basic needs of people, particularly the most vulnerable, and determine if the state’s current budgeting process is adequately providing essential social services to address them. Only then can the discussion turn to the issue of how to justly and equitably raise the revenues necessary to fund these basic needs and services.
- In evaluating the situation, careful attention should be given to what charities and volunteer groups can and cannot do to meet basic human needs in society. There are some services that these organizations cannot

address and which will require the resources of the government.

- The sales and use tax currently accounts for 45 percent of the revenues paid into the state’s general fund. Sales taxes are regressive in nature, as moderate and low-income working individuals and families pay a higher proportion of their income than higher-income individuals and families. Any change in the tax system should keep in mind the principle of progressivity and redress any unfair tax burden placed on lower-income individuals and families, especially the poorest among us.
- Likewise, the tax burden for individuals and businesses within the state must be equitably distributed. All taxing options available to the state should be considered in determining the fairness of the state’s sales and property tax, as well as the taxes borne by corporations and small businesses operating in the state.



A Pastoral Response

Catholic Social Teaching holds that paying taxes is one way that citizens meet their responsibility to promote the common good, especially addressing the basic needs of the poor. However, not all taxes or tax systems are fair and just. In fact, many people feel overburdened by the myriad of state and local taxes they pay. We urge our Catholic community and all citizens to become involved in the process of developing a fair and equitable system of taxation.

Washington State’s budget concerns must be addressed in light of equitable distribution of taxes and the widely shared belief that the existing tax system in Washington State needs reform. The budget cuts to social services can devastate individuals and families like Meghan, Carlos and Maria, and Darrell, and we must concern ourselves with the wellbeing of all.

The lives of all individuals and families in our state will be affected positively or negatively by the decisions our elected officials make. We encourage you to form your conscience in light of our Catholic teachings and advocate for the most vulnerable, so that every person may flourish as God intends.