THEMES OF CATHOLIC TEACHING
RELEVANT AS BUDGET WOES LOOM
By John Huebscher, Executive Director

The latest news out of the State Budget Office confirmed what most state government observers have feared for some time. Wisconsin is facing its most serious budget deficit on record. Like their counterparts in Washington, state policy makers confront serious choices as they manage Wisconsin's fiscal house.

Like other crises, financial difficulties can be defining. For it is the choices we make when faced with hard decisions that define who we are, and say more about what we value. It is at such times that we are in greatest need of principles and values to guide our judgment and clarify our vision.

Our Catholic tradition of social justice offers just such principles and values. Indeed, several basic themes of Catholic social teaching relate quite directly to the choices we face.

One theme is that of the common good. The common good calls us to look to the "general welfare," not special interests, as we evaluate what is best for society. Decisions about what programs to fund and which ones to do without can't be driven by the "clout" of interest groups. Rather, we need to ask how does keeping the program or curtailing it affect the well being of all. The common good reminds us that we can't be so fixated on the needs of any one program that we give short shrift to others of equal value.

Another theme is the preferential option for the poor. Central to the Gospel message is the notion that needy and vulnerable people have a special claim on our treasures and attention. This is not because the world owes the needy a living, but because all of us are diminished when individuals are not able to develop their talents and share their gifts. The poor and needy don't walk the halls of power or fund campaign commercials, but they have a moral right to human dignity that compels us to act on their behalf. The current crisis gives those claims new urgency. We must sustain those programs that respond to this claim, such as Medicaid, Wisconsin Works, and the Wisconsin Shares childcare subsidy program.

The theme of solidarity is also relevant. Solidarity is a Catholic way of saying "we're all in this together." In the world of budget making it means those of us who remain employed by both hard work and good luck can't ignore the needs of those who are suffering. Nor can we let unease over our own futures deaden our sensitivity to those less fortunate, especially those in places we cannot see or where we will never visit.
Another helpful theme as we evaluate the priorities of federal, state, and local government is the principle of **subsidiarity**. Subsidiarity tells us to seek the most local solution in meeting public needs. But subsidiarity is not a license to abandon families and communities. For subsidiarity includes the idea of "subsidy" in which a larger organization shares resources that allow people to manage their local affairs. This theme should guide the Legislature and Congress as they judge the worth of spending for local school aids, shared revenues, and aid programs for families.

Of course, the cornerstone of all this is the theme of **human life and dignity**. All budget decisions must be evaluated in light of their impact on the lives of people. Special care should be taken to design programs in a manner that does not denigrate the unique dignity of each person and strengthens the spirit of hope upon which we all thrive.

The themes of our social teaching are useful in debating issues and assessing how to vote. They are also vital to the task of governing. We "faithful citizens" need to keep them relevant in these tough economic times.

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