The Place of Poverty in the 2008 Elections

By John Carr

In his first encyclical, "Deus Caritas Est," Pope Benedict XVI places love and care for the poor at the center of Catholic life:

"Love of God and love of neighbor have become one: In the least of the brethren we find Jesus himself, and in Jesus we find God…. Love for widows and orphans, prisoners, and the sick and needy of every kind is as essential to her [the Church] as the ministry of the sacraments and preaching of the Gospel." (*Deus Caritas Est* # 15, 21)

This priority for the poor also needs to be at the center of the national discussion in this election year. The facts about poverty in our land raise significant moral and policy issues.

- Poverty is pervasive. One in eight Americans lives in poverty, which represents more than 37 million people.
- The younger you are in America the more likely you are to be poor. One in six children, or 13 million children, lives in poverty.
- Family factors contribute to poverty. A child born to unmarried parents who have not graduated from high school, without a worker in the family has an 80 percent chance of growing up poor. A child born to a family without these factors has an 8 percent chance.
- Poverty is not distributed evenly. While most people who live in poverty are white, one out of four African-Americans and one out of five Hispanics lives in poverty. (See the Catholic Campaign for Human Development's Poverty USA website, www.povertyusa.org.povfacts_race.shtml)

Such statistics show the kind of nation we are becoming.

U.S. Catholics have a moral obligation to protect the lives and dignity of all God's children, especially the poor and vulnerable. We can debate how best to pursue economic opportunity and justice, provide decent jobs for all who can work, and ensure adequate health care and housing. However, we cannot escape the moral duty to work actively to overcome the poverty and deprivation which diminishes the lives of so many children and families.

Unfortunately, debates about poverty often become polarized by ideological and partisan divisions. This political season campaigns needs to move beyond false ideological choices that often paralyze national discussion. Catholic teaching and experience insist that reducing poverty will require *personal* responsibility and *social* responsibility, better choices and behaviors by *individuals* and better policies and investments by *government.*

In their statement, "A Place at the Table," the U.S. bishops outline a four-part strategy to address poverty. It calls for:

1) **Individuals** to pursue education and work, to build strong families and to make sacrifices for children

2) **Churches, faith-based and community organizations** to support families, confront discrimination and injustice, strengthen neighborhoods and communities and stand with and help poor and vulnerable families

3) The **market, businesses and unions** to work to secure jobs at decent wages, health care and other benefits, a voice in the workplace, and efforts for growth and opportunity

4**) Government** to live up to its responsibility to protect the weak and vulnerable, promote human dignity and human rights, act effectively when other institutions fall short and promote greater economic opportunity and justice for all.

Sadly, some advocates embrace just one element rather than all. Some insist individual responsibility is the real answer, or that just faith-based institutions can make the difference, or that the market by itself can solve the problems or that government action is the only effective response. A comprehensive national commitment that addresses the complicated causes and diverse steps to overcome poverty is needed.

Isolated efforts cannot promote integral human development that is the foundation of effective efforts to overcome poverty, deprivation and despair (www.catholiccharitiesusa.org and www.usccb.org/sdwp/placeatthetable/index.shtml). In the upcoming elections, U.S. Catholics ought not to focus on individual economic interests, but rather seek to lift up the "least of these." In *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship* the U.S. bishops call for a new politics focused more on:

- moral principles than on the latest polls
- needs of the weak than on benefits for the strong
- pursuit of the common good than on the demands of narrow interests.

How we treat "the least among us" (Mt. 25:40) is a moral measure of our lives, as individuals and as a nation. In Scripture, this is the question on judgment day. It should be a central question on election day.

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