

## **WISCONSIN CATHOLIC CONFERENCE**

### **EYE ON THE CAPITOL**

**January 3, 2014**

#### **MUST CHRISTMAS SPIRIT END WITH THE CHRISTMAS SEASON?**

By John Huebscher, Executive Director

In some traditions, January 6<sup>th</sup> represents the 12<sup>th</sup> day of Christmas. As such, the date marks a transition from the Christmas season to the ordinary time of our lives. But does that have to mark the end of the “Christmas spirit?” Dare we hope that the softening of our hearts and the acts of kindness central Christmas might become an ongoing habit rather than a seasonal exception?

In ways large and small, we have opportunities to express, in our deeds and our choices, a concern for others, especially those whose needs may be greater than our own. Some of those opportunities may be found in our public policy choices.

Religion cannot and should not be reduced to such public policy choices. But neither can we divorce these choices we make as a community from our basic values and beliefs about the worth and dignity of our fellow human beings.

Several such choices await us as we enter into 2014.

The first involves food for needy families. Will we agree not to cut the Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program (SNAP) that provides food assistance to millions of poor people, including children? The funding for the SNAP program is part of the omnibus “Farm Bill” pending before Congress. To this point, the same Congress that wants to continue subsidies to profitable farms wants to impose deep cuts in the SNAP program. The US Conference of Catholic Bishops opposes these cuts. So should the rest of us.

Another choice is whether to extend unemployment insurance payments to nearly 5 million people (including almost 100,000 in Wisconsin) who suffer from long-term unemployment. Congress will consider an extension this month. In testimony to Congress on this issue, Fr. Larry Snyder, President of Catholic Charities USA, affirmed that, “While nothing can take the place of a good-paying job, ensuring that out-of-work Americans have the support they need to put food on the table and maintain a roof over their heads while they continue their search for employment is the decent and right thing to do.”

Will we provide a humane reform of our immigration policy? Currently our immigration laws keep more than 11 million people in a legal limbo, fearful of deportation that will rupture their families and deny our nation the benefits of their contributions as workers, neighbors and aspiring citizens. One would think that a nation built by immigrants, many of whom were poor and under educated when they arrived, is willing to do so.

Will we increase the minimum wage to restore the purchasing power it has lost over the past several decades? We often say that work has dignity. But we often forget that such dignity is

derived from the human beings who perform that work. That is why our Catholic tradition is emphatic that those who work must earn a living wage adequate to support not only them but also the family that depends on them for its daily bread.

Frequently the debates over issues affecting needy people include arguments that we should distinguish between those poor who are “deserving” and “undeserving.”

We should ask ourselves if that argument reflects the true spirit of Christmas.

As John’s Gospel tells us, God became human on that first Christmas as an act of love, not a reward for good behavior. That is worth recalling as we consider whether to help those in need.

It is important to “Keep Christ in Christmas.” It is also important to keep the lesson of Christmas in the choices we make in 2014.

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