

## WISCONSIN CATHOLIC CONFERENCE

### EYE ON THE CAPITOL

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#### THE COMMON GOOD MUST BE FOCAL POINT OF BUDGET DEBATE

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Now that the Governor has presented his state budget to the Legislature, fiscal issues and spending priorities will dominate the legislative agenda for the next several months.

First, the Joint Committee on Finance will hold hearings on the proposals. Then some of the standing committees may hold “subject matter” hearings on aspects of the budget related to their areas of expertise. Finally, sometime in May or early June the two houses of the Legislature will take turns debating the revised budget that emerges from the Joint Finance Committee.

Throughout this period, interest groups and citizens will have opportunities to share their views about the budget. Often their comments and advocacy will focus on those specific parts of the budget that affect them most directly.

The Church, however, calls on all citizens, especially Catholics, to consider something larger, namely to pursue the common good and social justice.

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, citing the Vatican II *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (Gaudium et spes)*, explains that the common good should be understood as “the sum total of social conditions which allow people, either as groups or as individuals, to reach their fulfillment more fully and more easily.” (#1906)

The *Catechism* goes on to describe the three essential elements of the common good: 1) respect for the person; 2) the social well-being and development of the group itself; and 3) peace, that is, the stability and security of a just order. Finally, the *Catechism* affirms that it is in the political community that the common good is most completely realized and that “[i]t is the role of the state to defend and promote the common good of civil society, its citizens, and intermediate bodies.” (#1910)

The common good article is followed closely by an article devoted to social justice, which the *Catechism* teaches is linked to the common good and the exercise of authority in three ways: 1) respect for the human person so that “everyone should look upon his neighbor (without any exception) as ‘another self,’ above all bearing in mind his life and the means necessary for living it with dignity;” 2) the equality and differences among men and women and the consequent need for “those endowed with particular ‘talents’ [to] share the benefits with those who need them;” and 3) human solidarity “where tensions are better able to be reduced and conflicts more readily settled by negotiation.” (#1928-42)

Assessing budget issues from the perspective of the common good invites us to ask questions like the following:

- Does the budget foster the social well-being and development of the entire state over that of special interests?
- Does the budget respect the fundamental and inalienable rights of the human person, in particular, the right to act according to a sound norm of conscience and to safeguard privacy, and freedom of religion?
- In assessing what the people of Wisconsin need, does the budget give due consideration to what they can afford to pay for at this moment in history?
- Does the budget recognize the equal dignity of human persons and thereby strive to reduce excessive economic and social disparity?
- Does the budget foster solidarity among all our people by asking all to share in any sacrifice that may be necessary?
- Does the budget prioritize the needs of those who are poor? Does it mitigate their sacrifice even if it means asking more of those who are better off financially?
- Does the budget enhance or inhibit the role of the state to defend and promote the common good of civil society?

People of good will may differ on how to answer questions like these. But if we truly share a commitment to the common good and social justice, we should be willing to say that both are the proper starting points for a responsible and constructive debate over the state budget.

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