

WISCONSIN CATHOLIC CONFERENCE

EYE ON THE CAPITOL

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WHAT LEVEL OF GOVERNMENT IS BEST? PRINCIPLE OF SUBSIDIARITY CAN HELP

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We often debate the issue of how much government should do, but that rarely ends the argument. For even when we can agree that government has a role in addressing an issue, we often debate which level of government is best suited to do so.

Our Catholic social teaching can help us consider that question. The tool it offers is the principle of subsidiarity.

The principle of subsidiarity is not a household phrase, but it can be very useful for citizens who are trying to decide if a given problem is best handled by the local, state, or federal government, or even on an international scale.

Pope Pius XI introduced the concept in 1931 in his social encyclical, *Quadragesimo anno*. Writing in the midst of the Great Depression, Pius noted that the modern economy was so complex that national and even international government authorities might be needed to set things right. “As history abundantly proves,” he noted, “it is true that on account of changed conditions many things that were done by small associations in former times cannot be done now save by large associations.” (#79)

However, in that same paragraph Pius warned that it would be a mistake to over centralize: “For every social activity ought of its very nature to furnish help to the members of the body social, and never destroy and absorb them.”

In the next paragraph the Pope explained, “The supreme authority of the State ought, therefore, to let subordinate groups handle matters and concerns of lesser importance.... Thereby the State will more freely, powerfully and effectively do all those things that belong to it alone because it alone can do them: directing, watching, urging, restraining, as occasion requires and necessity demands.” (#80)

Sixty years later, Pope John Paul II made a similar argument in his encyclical, *Centesimus annus*. Like Pius XI, John Paul II took note of the globalization of the world economy and addressed the potential need for international bodies to regulate or govern some areas of human activity.

But he too warned against over centralization. The Pope wrote, “a community of a higher order should not interfere in the internal life of a community of a lower order, depriving the latter of its functions, but rather should support it in case of need and help to co-ordinate its activity with the activities of the rest of society, always with a view to the common good.” (#48)

This preference for a local response is not the same thing as saying that a higher level of government has no role. For subsidiarity suggests the notion of “subsidy.” This is why John Paul II suggests that the higher order should support the lower order in case of need and help to see that different levels organize their efforts for the common good.

Seen this way, school vouchers, where the state empowers parents to fulfill their role as primary educators of children, is an example of subsidiarity. So are state school aids and shared revenues to local government. Other examples might be transfer payments to needy individuals to help them meet their basic needs, or tax credits to businesses that create jobs.

Applying the principle of subsidiarity to a policy issue will not always point us to a “local” solution. Nor will doing so always suggest that a higher level of government take charge or provide help to a lower level or to individuals. But if we citizens take the time to reflect on this principle as we make our policy choices, the policies we select will be the better for it.

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