

### Care for people in times of need

In 2012, my office surveyed Catholic Church-related charity care provided within our diocese. At the time, the value of financial and volunteer support totaled \$54 million for 2011 alone. The survey included parish outreaches, food pantries, support to maternity care offices, Catholic-sponsored hospitals, national collections, Haiti missions, Catholic Relief Services and St. Vincent de Paul Society thrift stores. By federal law, hospitals annually reported charity care as “community benefit” which is not the same as bad debt. The hospitals accounted the lion’s share of our dollar figure. I have not commissioned such a survey since.

Why mention this now? Our volunteer and non-profit work has continued generously. But today, both our federal and state budgets are restructuring social services by limiting and cutting back available dollars. Remember that your basic math pairs restricted dollars with the ever-diminishing purchasing power of those same dollars. Whether or not you agree with the legislated shrinking dollar commitment for health care and food assistance as a matter of policy, I can foresee a challenge for us as church people.

The challenge comes in any language that parallels a phrase used by George H.W. Bush in his 1988 campaign and his 1989 inaugural address. I remember well “The Thousand Points of Light” that congratulated volunteer and non-profit efforts to shore up social welfare so that government’s burden would be less. The problem comes when economic decisions made by the government itself cause the stress in services affecting health, housing and aging.

I pray to be wrong, but I foresee that by Christmas and next Easter volunteer and non-profit organizations will be nudged to pick up the slack. Public officials will be praising us for being compassionate and heroic. But there will not be enough resources to alleviate a systemic problem that requires cooperation between public and private spheres. This will be true even if vastly more individuals exercise better choices and healthier habits.

The Federalist Papers (1787-1788) were written as background to advocate ratification of the U.S. Constitution. Alexander Hamilton, James Madison and John Jay produced essays that foresaw the dangers of inequality in the new republic. While not specifying either poverty relief or social welfare, the papers posit that the government must undertake measures to offset imbalances and inequalities that would create factions threatening the stability of the republic. Admittedly, not every inequality happens because of “the system.” The challenge in a republic is getting us all to understand that the balancing process will make demands on all of us. And that process will have to be continual.

I anticipate a comment that I should stay on my side of the church and state divide. But I am a citizen, a grateful tax payer and an employer. These obligate me to participate in the public conversation about matters that affect all of us. As a member of the Church with you, what affects the poor, needy and vulnerable people affects us all.

At a June retreat for bishops, retired Archbishop J. Michael Miller, CSB (Vancouver) reminded our group: the Gospels without mention of poverty would be incomprehensible. And so we cannot be Christian without acknowledging poverty and our fraternal relationship to those who experience need. Nor can we absolve ourselves from citizen rights and responsibilities to support principled legislation and leadership.

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