

GOP budget chief ducks questions on budget's Catholic roots

by [Lauren Markoe](#)

April 26, 2012

c. 2012 Religion News Service WASHINGTON (RNS) Paul Ryan did not want to engage in a theological debate. Speaking at Georgetown University Thursday (April 26), the GOP's chief budget writer tread lightly into the controversy he touched off last week when he asserted that his economic blueprint for the nation was consistent with Catholic teaching.

The Catholic theologians and faculty who were prepared to confront him were left wanting more.

"I was disappointed. I wanted to have a much more extensive conversation about the role of Catholic social teaching in public policy," said the Rev. Tom Reese, one of the organizers of a critical letter to Ryan from nearly 90 Georgetown faculty and administrators.

The letter argues that Catholic social teaching does not support the Republican budget, which, according to the letter, "decimates food programs for struggling families, radically weakens protections for the elderly and sick, and gives more tax breaks to the wealthiest few."

The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, too, also sent a letter rebutting Ryan's assertion. Ryan fought back, stating that the bishops letter did not represent all American bishops. The USCCB then retorted that it did.

But at Georgetown, Ryan -- the chairman of the House Budget Committee and a possible vice-presidential candidate -- seemed to seek to quell the debate. He called his budget a roadmap to avoid a debt crisis that will hurt the poor hardest of all.

And he seemed to soft-pedal his defense of the document as consistent with Catholic teaching.

"The work I do as a Catholic holding office conforms to the social doctrine as best I can make of it," the Wisconsin Republican told an audience composed mostly of students, faculty and staff. "What I have to say about the social doctrine of the church is from the viewpoint of a Catholic in politics applying my understanding to the problems of the day."

In his 25-minute speech, Ryan invoked Winston Churchill, Ronald Reagan, former Rep. Jack Kemp, R-N.Y., and Pope Benedict XVI.

"The overarching threat to our whole society today is the exploding federal debt," Ryan said. "The Holy Father, Pope Benedict, has charged that governments, communities, and individuals running up high debt levels are 'living at the expense of future generations' and 'living in untruth.'"

The pope dislikes the debt as much as anyone, Reese responded after the speech. "But Pope Benedict would not want to balance the budget on the backs of the poor. In fact, Pope Benedict, along with the bishops, would have no problem with raising taxes as part of a comprehensive budget solution."

Talking about his budget's Catholic underpinnings, Ryan spoke of "the twin virtues of solidarity and subsidiarity." Only together can government, the private sector, charities, churches and individuals place the nation on the path to prosperity again, he said, addressing the first virtue.

As for subsidiarity, a principle of Catholic social teaching that calls for the most local authority to make policy, Ryan invoked parts of his plan that would shrink federal authority.

"When we lower tax rates by closing special-interest loopholes, we're saying we in Washington don't need to micromanage people's decisions through the tax code," he said.

About 20 protesters stood outside the hall where Ryan spoke, some holding a banner that read: "Were you there when they crucified the poor?" One of those holding up the banner, and her 13-month-old daughter, was Vanessa Richart of Washington.

"I'm not normally someone who attends protests but I really feel strongly that using Catholic social teaching as a justification for a budget that so severely cuts programs

for the poor, particularly poor families, is unjust," she said.

Ryan began his speech with a joke. The punch line has St. Peter telling a new Methodist in heaven not to make too much noise, lest the Catholics discover they're not the only ones there.

"I suppose there are some Catholics who for a long time have thought they had a monopoly of sorts ... not exactly on heaven, but on the social teaching of our church," Ryan continued. "Of course there can be differences among faithful Catholics on this."