

Paul Ryan's not-very-Catholic Catholic budget

by [David Gibson](#)

April 28, 2012

c. 2012 Religion News Service (RNS) Give Congressman Paul Ryan credit for persistence. The Wisconsin Republican and architect of the GOP's budget plan has spent a month arguing that his party's proposals to cut programs for the needy while sparing the Defense Department and not raising taxes on the wealthy are in line with the social justice teaching of his own Catholic Church.

And for just as long, Catholic groups and theologians -- and even the Catholic bishops -- have been saying that in fact the GOP plan fails to meet the basic "moral criteria" of Catholic teaching.

Undaunted, Ryan returned to the fray this week. He penned a column on Thursday (April 26) in the conservative National Catholic Register saying that the House-passed budget reflects "Catholic social truths."

That same day, he visited Georgetown University, the flagship Jesuit school and decidedly hostile terrain for Ryan's strain of economic libertarianism, where he argued for his budget's priorities despite vocal and visible protests by faculty and students.

Yet even as Ryan continues to press the point, it seems like an argument he is destined to lose, at least in the realm of theology.

The chief reason is that Ryan (and other Catholic conservatives and Republicans, like House Speaker John Boehner) has sought to justify his budget priorities in terms of the Catholic principle known as "subsidiarity," but the evidence shows his platform and that principle just don't match up.

To be sure, the term "subsidiarity" probably does not play a big role in the average Catholic's vocabulary. But since at least the 19th century, the teaching has been central to how the church envisions a just and equitable society functioning in a

world dominated by big business and big government, both of which can dehumanize individuals and undermine the common good.

The principle of subsidiarity was first articulated in 1891 in Pope Leo XIII's landmark social encyclical, *Rerum Novarum*. Papal statements up through the encyclicals of the current pontiff, Benedict XVI, have continued to reinforce and elaborate on the idea.

Still, subsidiarity, as theologian Meghan Clark noted, "is perhaps one of the most crucial and most misunderstood in Catholic social teaching."

The misunderstanding is in part because subsidiarity has two complementary elements: It argues that lower levels of society (individuals, families, communities) should be allowed to carry out social functions that they can fulfill and larger society (state and federal governments), meanwhile, should provide help ("subsidium," is the formal Latin term) to cover things the smaller units cannot.

Society's decisions should be made, Clark wrote at the Catholic Moral Theology blog, "at the lowest level possible and the highest level necessary." It's not just a matter of ever smaller government, or reflexively devolving responsibilities downward, but of making sure that key societal functions are provided for.

If Washington has to do it, so be it; if Mayberry can do it, all the better. But if Mayberry can't, then Washington has an obligation to step in.

"The principle of subsidiarity protects people from abuses by higher-level social authority and calls on these same authorities to help individuals and intermediate groups to fulfill their duties," says the Vatican's *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*.

In recent years, Catholic conservatives, and especially those like Ryan with a libertarian bent, have focused almost exclusively on the first part of the formula to present a kind of laissez-faire version of Catholic economics. In this reading, government-sponsored universal health care and social service programs, among other things, would violate Catholic teaching and infringe on the individual's freedom and duty to work hard and contribute to society.

University of Dayton theologian Vincent Miller called this interpretation the "careful lobotomization of subsidiarity," while the National Catholic Reporter's Michael Sean

Winters memorably likened it to "mere subsidiarity run amok or, better to say, subsidiarity in drag."

In an interview in early April that prompted the latest debate, Ryan doubled down on his version when he compared subsidiarity to "federalism," "meaning government closest to the people governs best."

Even a number of Catholic conservatives were prompted to correct the House Budget Committee chairman on that score.

"Federalism is a principle of political decentralization which often parallels the principle of subsidiarity, but is not identical to it," wrote Stephen P. White of the Ethics and Public Policy Center.

White explained that "subsidiarity is not about exercising power at the lowest possible level so much as it is about locating social responsibility in its proper place...The goal or end of subsidiarity is the proper ordering of society for the common good."

Moreover, theologians and church leaders point out that subsidiarity without the corresponding principle of solidarity leaves people to fend for themselves, the weak falling prey to the powerful.

"The right ordering of economic life cannot be left to a free competition of forces," Pope Pius XI wrote in the 1931 encyclical *Quadragesimo Anno*, another keystone for Catholic social teaching on subsidiarity. "For from this source, as from a poisoned spring, have originated and spread all the errors of individualist economic teaching."

In his 1961 encyclical, *Mater et Magistra*, Pope John XXIII articulated another element of subsidiarity, writing that, "In a system of taxation based on justice and equity, it is fundamental that the burdens be proportioned to the capacity of the people contributing."

Experts and church leaders agree that none of this corresponds to the Republican budget that Ryan crafted, even though Ryan has echoed many of the terms that the Catholic Church uses.

But none of this means that the Republican formula won't win the political debate over America's financial course, or that his approach won't revive the economy in the long run, even if it hurts some in the short run.

Put another way, the ends could indeed justify the means. But that principle goes against Catholic moral theology, too.