

Bishops urge Senate to protect needs of poor as budget is debated

WASHINGTON - Acknowledging that Congress and the administration face “difficult challenges” in tackling the country’s massive budget deficit, the U.S. bishops reiterated their call that the needs of poor and vulnerable people must be protected in any budget decisions.

The bishops urged lawmakers to protect human life and dignity as the budget debates unfold in a May 5 letter to each member of the Senate.

The letter was signed by Bishop Stephen E. Blaire of Stockton, Calif., chairman of the Committee on Domestic Justice and Human Development, and Bishop Howard J. Hubbard of Albany, N.Y., chairman of the Committee on International Justice and Peace.

“The moral measure of this budget debate is not which party wins or which powerful interests prevail, but rather how those who are jobless, hungry, homeless or poor are treated,” the bishops wrote. “Their voices are too often missing in these debates, but they have the most compelling moral claim on our consciences and our common resources.”

Saying they were offering their views as “pastors and teachers, not experts or partisans,” the bishops acknowledged that the decisions ahead will be difficult. The discussion “requires wise bipartisan leadership, clear priorities, and moral clarity,” they wrote.

The bishops reminded lawmakers that “a just framework for future budgets cannot rely on disproportionate cuts in essential services to poor persons.”

“It requires shared sacrifice by all, including raising adequate revenues, eliminating unnecessary military and other spending, and addressing the long-term costs of health insurance and retirement programs fairly,” they said.

While the bishops also said they were not offering a detailed critique of specific

budget proposals, they pointed to the need to assure access to “affordable, life-affirming health care” for all Americans. They also expressed concern about the human and social costs of substantial cuts to food and nutrition, child development, education and affordable housing programs.

“We recognize that the rising costs of Medicare, Medicaid and other entitlement programs need to be addressed, but we urge that the needs of the poor, working families and vulnerable people be protected. Cost-cutting proposals should not simply shift health care costs from the federal government to the states or directly to beneficiaries. Such measures could leave more elderly, working families and poor people without the assurance of adequate and affordable health care,” the letter said.

The bishops also voiced their support for poverty-focused international assistance while raising concern over a proposed 37 percent cut in the foreign operations budget.

“A cut of this magnitude is likely to devastate poverty-focused efforts and the people who depend on it. We ask the Senate to support poverty-focused assistance and to continue reform of foreign assistance so it is even more effective for the poorest people in the poorest places on earth,” the bishops said.