

# Hartford bishop urges greater attention to needs of poor in budget debates

HARTFORD, Conn. - Warning that "budget cuts that negate assistance to our cities can end up costing the society much more in the long run," a retired auxiliary bishop of Hartford said such cuts could make urban areas "ripe for explosive riots such as those we saw in the 1960s."

Bishop Peter A. Rosazza said in an opinion piece that appeared Aug. 21 in The Hartford Courant newspaper that the budget cuts approved by Congress before its August recess seem to fall disproportionately on the poor and vulnerable members of society.

Catholic Charities USA has said, for example, that the cuts would eliminate 500 emergency food and shelter centers and reduce funding to 1,000 others, he said.

"One way of judging any society's moral worth is to evaluate how it attempts to empower or care for those in need," Bishop Rosazza wrote. "Now, even though we struggle through our worst recession in years, we have to pay up."

He said the present budget deficit has resulted from the tax cuts and "generous prescription drug benefit" enacted during the administration of President George W. Bush and funding for two wars by Bush and President Barack Obama.

"Only a small percentage of the deficit is due to spending on programs through which we as citizens assist those in need," the bishop said. "If we consider ourselves a people with high moral standards, then we cannot slam the burden on the neediest persons in our society."

Bishop Rosazza said the discussions on raising the debt ceiling included "next to nothing about the common good."

"People old enough like me to have experienced the spirit of America during World

War II recall how we came together and sacrificed to support those in the military who fought in our name," the 76-year-old bishop said.

"Hopefully that spirit once again can animate us as together we strive to deal with the growing deficit - while taking into consideration the needs of the poor and unemployed who are our brothers and sisters," he added.

Poor people's needs also were on the minds of Michigan's Catholic bishops. On Aug. 24, the day the state Legislature passed a bill to reform welfare, an official with the Michigan Catholic Conference, the bishops' public policy arm, said the impact of the measure "will be felt by poor and vulnerable Michigan residents and children for years to come."

The bill has gone to Gov. Rick Snyder, who was expected to sign it.

According to the Detroit Free Press daily newspaper, more than 11,000 recipients are expected to lose benefits Oct. 1, the start of the fiscal year, under the new four-year limit on welfare. In addition to cutting state benefits, the law calls for stricter enforcement of the 60-month lifetime limit on federal assistance funded by Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, or TANF.

The Catholic conference said about 25,000 children will be affected by the cut in benefits, adding that the bill was "fast-tracked through the legislative process while neglecting to address how the measures will impact destitute children."

"It is highly unfortunate and counterproductive to the state's future economy for the Legislature to casually dismiss the economic reality of thousands of Michigan children," said Tom Hickson, the conference's vice president for public policy and advocacy.