

Rockville Centre bishop urges Congress to remember working poor in tax-policy debates

WASHINGTON - The head of the bishops' domestic policy committee has urged Congress to make the working poor a priority in current tax-policy debates.

"Too often the weak and vulnerable are not heard in the tax debate," wrote Bishop William F. Murphy of Rockville Centre, N.Y., in a Sept. 20 letter to Congress. He asked Congress specifically to preserve and improve the child tax credit and the earned income tax credit.

The tax cuts for all individuals, enacted in 2001 and 2003, will expire at the end of the year unless Congress takes action to extend them. President Barack Obama and Democrats in Congress are pushing for an extension of tax cuts for all but the wealthiest Americans, while Republicans want to extend the cuts for all taxpayers.

"Poor children and their families have compelling needs ... yet they often lack powerful allies and influential advocates," Bishop Murphy noted.

He particularly stressed the importance of extending the income eligibility requirements for the current child tax credit. He said if this provision is not continued, 600,000 more children will become poor and 4 million children already in poverty will fall into deeper poverty.

The bishop also emphasized the importance of retaining the current provisions of the earned income tax credit, which Congress modified in 2009. The tax credit currently helps families with three or more children and has increased the amount of tax relief for married couples. These changes, the bishop said, prevented 3 million people from falling into poverty in 2009 and increased the size of credit to 7 million families.

"This is no time to abandon these important parts of the safety net for low-income families and married couples," he said.

Bishop Murphy drew on Pope Benedict XVI's 2009 encyclical, "Caritas in Veritate" ("Charity in Truth"), which said that economic decisions have ethical consequences.

Quoting the document, he said: "The church's social doctrine has always maintained that justice must be applied to every phase of economic activity, because this is always concerned with man and his needs. Locating resources, financing, production, consumption and all the other phases in the economic cycle inevitably have moral implications. Thus, every economic decision has a moral consequence."

The bishop stressed that U.S. Catholic bishops have been strong supporters of the earned income tax credit and the child tax credit for years saying they help "workers and families raising children to provide the necessities of life."

"Unless Congress acts," he wrote, "these vulnerable workers and their children will be left worse off than they are now."