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Race and the 2012 Presidential Election

By Alex Mikulich, Ph.D.

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We live in an odd in-between time, neither free of the racist politics of the past nor committed to achieving racial justice within our multi-racial reality. In the 2012 U.S. presidential election, the casualties of racism include not only the lives lost to death-dealing racism, but also truth and justice.

As in 2008, there is a new opportunity for people of faith to counter-frame the worn-out white narratives dominating the political landscape. Sadly, in 2012, leading Catholic institutions have yet to lend their witness to racial justice or contend fully with America’s racial history.

There is a critical need, both on the grounds of Catholic social teaching and fundamental democratic values, to counter-frame the dominant white narrative. Doing so is a prerequisite step toward a future that embraces our increasingly diverse citizenry. Yet to do so we also need to expose the hard and soft racial frames that keep structural inequities invisible in public policy debates while they pollute our souls.

By “racial frame” I mean the perceptions, stereotypes, ideologies, narratives, and emotive responses used to make sense of the role of race in society.¹ Joe Feagin, a preeminent scholar of race, explains that “hard racial framing” typically employs explicitly racist language and imagery, openly invokes white superiority, and expresses overt disgust with people of color. In contrast, he explains, “soft racial framing” eschews explicitly racist language (like the N-word) but commonly downplays or ignores structural racism through so-called colorblind language and glorifies persons of color who do not acknowledge systemic inequalities.

Widespread use of white racial frames since the election of Barack Obama belies the claim that we live in a “post-racial” society. Even during his candidacy, it was widely reported that Obama received more death threats than any presidential candidate in history and he gained Secret Service protection eighteen months prior to the election, earlier than any previous presidential candidate.²

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Upon his election and entry into office, blatantly racist language and imagery, depicting the President and his family as monkeys, as Hitler, and questioning his citizenship became widely available on the Internet and in Tea Party protests across the nation.³ Such imagery hearkens back to Thomas Jefferson's *Notes from Virginia*, in which he likened Africans to orangutans, and demonstrates how we remain moored to our racist past.⁴

Hard racial framing was also used against President Obama and Judge Sonia Sotomayor upon her nomination to the Supreme Court. Newt Gingrich and several other prominent Republicans criticized Sotomayor as a "Latina racist."⁵ Their criticism focused upon a speech Sotomayor gave to students at the University of California Law School at Berkeley. Her speech, entitled "Raising the Bar: Latino and Latina Presence in the Judiciary and the Struggle for Representation,"⁶ discussed her Latina identity "and the influence I perceive that it has on the bench." She expressed the view that racial and gender diversity on the bench would provide a broader perspective because socially and economically disadvantaged groups offer a particular experiential perspective on issues of inequality that elude relatively privileged whites. She acknowledged that white male judges in *Brown v. Board of Education* were able to see past their privileged position (critics conveniently ignored this part of her speech). Sotomayor concluded, "I would hope that a wise Latina woman with the richness of her experiences would more often than not reach a better conclusion than a white male who has not lived that life." Far from racist, she expresses a perspective central to the wisdom of the preferential option in Catholic social teaching. John Paul II explains that it is from the vantage point of the oppressed in society that the faithful can give concrete expression to loving one's neighbor as oneself and "serve him instead of oppressing him for one's own advantage."⁷

Mitt Romney's July 11, 2012 speech to the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People utilized soft racial framing by failing to acknowledge any concrete structural impediments that people of color face. Although Romney acknowledged disproportionate joblessness in African American communities, his NAACP speech and campaign proposals do not recognize any political or economic structures that hinder development of communities of color. Romney stressed free markets and reducing government spending as the path to economic

freedom for African Americans. By failing to acknowledge any specific, concrete structural impediment well known to his NAACP audience, he did not demonstrate any practical understanding of white complicity in the devastating consequences of racism today.

Both hard and soft racial frames fail to acknowledge what President Obama has accomplished for social justice and the common good. For example, as Michael Grunwald, Senior Correspondent for *Time* magazine explains through the title of his new book, *The New Deal: The Hidden Story of Change in the Obama Era*, both conservative and liberal critics of the President have failed to acknowledge the successes of the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA). Grunwald details how the ARRA not only provided short-term aid that provided assistance to states and victims of the Great Recession, it also provided long-term re-investment that included \$90 billion for clean energy—the first such public investment of this magnitude in alternative energy.⁸

The Affordable Care Act, if fully implemented, can significantly shrink the nation's racial disparities in health insurance coverage and costs.⁹ Although the plan provides critically important preventive care and immunizations, expands local access through community health centers (badly needed in vulnerable neighborhoods), and prevents insurance companies from rescinding people's coverage when they get sick, Republicans nearly universally opposed the Act (one Republican House member voted for an early version of the bill).

Presidential candidate Obama's speech on race on March 18, 2008, counter-framed race by explaining how racial inequalities "can be directly traced to inequalities passed on from an earlier generation that suffered under the brutal legacy of slavery and Jim Crow," and invited whites not only to recognize the claims of African Americans not just with words but with deeds by investing in schools and communities, enforcing Civil Rights laws, and providing new ladders of opportunity.¹⁰

Nevertheless, as Frederick Harris explains, Obama has tended to stress race-neutral policies, which may exact a price for all those who still struggle at the bottom of economic and racial divides.¹¹ Until whites acknowledge the wisdom of Obama's speech on race and our common need to learn from people of color throughout U.S. history, we will fail to counter the white racial frames that block the possibility of racial and economic justice in the future.

—Endnotes on back cover



Catholic Social Thought (CST) and the Common Good

By Fred Kammer, S.J.

“The Catechism notes three essential elements of the common good: respect for the individual, the social well-being and development of the group, and peace...”

Critical to Catholic thinking is the fundamental concept of *the common good*. The Catechism, following Pope John XXIII in *Mater et Magistra* and Vatican II, defines the common good as: “the sum total of social conditions which allow people, either as groups or as individuals, to reach their fulfillment more fully and more easily.”¹ The common good applies to each human community, but its most complete realization occurs in the political community where the state’s role is “to defend and promote the common good of civil society, its citizens, and intermediate bodies.”²

Three Essential Elements

The Catechism notes *three essential elements* of the common good: *respect for the individual, the social well-being and development of the group, and peace* which results from the stability of a just society. The common good’s conceptual roots lie in Greek and Roman philosophy as the goal of political life, the good of the city (*pólis*), and the task entrusted to civic leaders.³

Regarding the first essential of individual respect, the Catechism notes that all “public authorities are bound to respect the fundamental and inalienable rights of the human person.”⁴ This means far more than the utilitarian “greatest good for the greatest number,” but insists that majorities respect individual rights.

The common good’s second element—the group’s social well-being and development—maintains that authority’s proper function is to arbitrate between various particular interests in

society. Essential to this is ensuring the accessibility to each person of “what is needed to lead a truly human life: food, clothing, health, work, education and culture, suitable information, the right to establish a family, and so on.”⁵

The third element of peace and stability of a just social order presupposes that “authority should ensure by morally acceptable means the *security* of society and its members.”

Whose Responsibility?

First of all, everyone has responsibility for the common good as an embodiment of charity and justice. In Pope Benedict’s words, “The more we strive to secure a common good corresponding to the real needs of our neighbors, the more effectively we love them. Every Christian is called to practice this charity, in a manner corresponding to his vocation and according to the degree of influence he wields in the *pólis*.”⁶ The pontiff indicates that this is the “institutional path” of charity—addressing juridical, civil, political, and cultural institutions. When animated by true charity, this path has greater worth than a merely secular and political stand.

The state shares responsibility for the common good since “*the common good is the reason that the political authority exists*.”⁷ The State must ensure the coherency, unity, and organization of civil society “in order that the common good may be attained with the contribution of every citizen.”⁸

A Global Duty

Common good responsibility is not just about “my country.” The Church speaks of a *universal common good* resulting from the increasing human interdependence of globalization.⁸ According to Pope Benedict, this common good and the effort to achieve it must assume “the dimensions of the whole human family, that is to say, the community of peoples and nations, in such a way as to shape the *earthly city* in unity and peace, rendering it to some degree an anticipation and a prefiguration of the undivided *city of God*.”⁹

ENDNOTES

- 1 *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, No. 1906, citing Pope John XXIII, *Mater et Magistra*, 1961, no. 65 and Vatican Council II, *Gaudium et Spes*, 1965, no. 26.
- 2 *Catechism*, no. 1910.
- 3 Rev. Charles E. Bouchard, OP, STD, *Catholic Healthcare and the Common Good*, *Health Progress*, May-June 1999, pp. 34-40, at 34.
- 4 *Catechism*, no. 1907.
- 5 *Ibid.*, no. 1908.
- 6 Pope Benedict XVI, *Caritas in Veritate* (2009), no. 7.
- 7 *Catechism*, no. 168.
- 8 *Ibid.*
- 9 *Ibid.*, no. 1911.
- 10 Pope Benedict, op. cit., no. 7, emphasis in original.

Fairy Tale or Worse?

By Fred Kammer, S.J.

The Ryan-Romney Budget Plan and Catholic Moral Criteria

For a nation still mired in the aftermath of the Great Recession, the economic well-being of the country—measured in unemployment, underemployment, and poverty—is a primary election issue. President Obama's efforts to drastically change course from the Bush economic debacle have been stymied by Congress and hardly helped by the meager efforts of the Federal Reserve. As “no new taxes” pledges blocked compromise on a major federal budget turnaround, Congress did agree on a Budget Control Act that will trigger across-the-board cuts—“sequestration”—in January 2013.

House Republicans adopted a 2012 fiscal plan championed by Budget Committee Chairman Paul Ryan, now Republican vice-presidential candidate. Presidential candidate Mitt Romney called the plan a “bold and exciting effort,” “very much needed,” “marvelous,” an “important step,” and indicated that he would have signed it into law if he were president. The plan represents a major redirection being urged on the American public and deserves close scrutiny.

Looked at through the lens of Catholic social teaching, the plan is not just morally flawed. It is, frankly, immoral in both broad outlines and specific measures. Before spelling out this judgment, we should review what the U.S. Catholic Bishops wrote to House members:

As teachers, we offer several moral criteria to help guide difficult budget decisions:

1. Every budget decision should be assessed by whether it protects or threatens human life and dignity.
2. A central moral measure of any budget proposal is how it affects “the least of these” (Matthew 25). The needs of those who are hungry and homeless, without work or in poverty should come first.
3. Government and other institutions have a shared responsibility to promote the common good of all, especially ordinary workers and families who struggle to live in dignity in difficult economic times.¹

These are not casual or ad hoc moral criteria dreamed up in Washington offices of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops. Rather they reflect time-tested Catholic moral principles for a just society, including the common good (see article on page 2), the preferential love for the poor and vulnerable, distributive and contributive justice, and progressive taxation, among others.

The bishops followed these moral criteria with the following application in bold:

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.

The Ryan budget plan—now fairly called the Ryan-Romney plan—has done precisely the opposite: reducing revenues by increasing tax cuts for the very wealthy, increasing military spending, and making disproportionate cuts in essential services to low-income Americans.

Tax cuts on top of tax cuts

The Ryan-Romney plan would increase taxes on the poor while reducing in half taxes for millionaires and cutting corporate taxes. Top individual tax rate would drop to 25 percent, the lowest level since the Hoover Administration.² Millionaires would receive a tax cut of \$265,000 while families with incomes below \$30,000 would have tax increases due to the elimination of the refundable portion of the Earned Income Tax Credit, Child Tax Credit, and American Opportunity Tax Credit. Incomes at the top would increase 12.5 percent, while the income of those in the middle (\$40-70,000) would increase less than 2 percent in another redistribution of income from middle-America to the wealthy. This is regressive, not progressive taxation—a fatal moral flaw. The cost of these tax cuts is \$4.6 trillion dollars in lost federal revenue over the next 10 years, in addition to the plan's proposal for \$5 trillion in revenue loss by making permanent all of the Bush tax cuts, which so contributed to the current deficit and recession.³

Shredding the safety net

On April 27, 2011, a broad coalition of Catholic, Protestant, Evangelical, and other Christian church leaders called for a “Circle of Protection” around programs for the hungry and poor in this country and abroad. They then spelled out the moral basis for this position:

“Looked at through the lens of Catholic social teaching, the plan is not just morally flawed. It is, frankly, immoral in both broad outlines and specific measures.”

As Christians, we believe the moral measure of the debate is how the most poor and vulnerable people fare. We look at every budget proposal from the bottom up—how it treats those Jesus called “the least of these” (Matthew 25:45).⁴

Unfortunately, on top of serious cuts under the Budget Control Act, the Ryan-Romney budget plan proposes to make 62 percent (\$3.3 trillion) of huge domestic budget cuts from programs serving lower-income Americans over 10 years. These include: \$2.4 trillion from Medicaid and other health care for people with low or moderate incomes; \$134 billion from SNAP, formerly known as the Food Stamp Program; \$463 billion in mandatory programs serving low-income Americans, including education, training, employment, and social services; and at least \$291 billion from discretionary programs for low-income Americans, including housing, child care for the working poor, WIC, Head Start, Pell Grants, domestic violence services, emergency food, and job training.⁵

The human costs are immeasurable. The Urban Institute estimates that states would drop 14-17 million people from Medicaid under the plan’s block grant strategy and one-third reduction in funding—mostly affecting low-income children, the disabled, and the elderly. The plan would repeal the Affordable Care Act (ACA), denying an additional 17 million low-income people eligibility for Medicaid which the ACA affords.⁶

Degrading Medicare

The Ryan-Romney plan turns Medicare into a “premium support” or voucher program, not immediately, but for all beneficiaries beginning in 2023. In

addition, it limits the growth of the value of the voucher to less than inflation of medical costs, forces recipients to buy more expensive and less efficient private health insurance, gradually raises the eligibility age to 67 by 2034, and repeals the ACA coverage of the prescription drug “donut hole” and its mandate to cover preventive services without cost sharing. Slowly and inexorably, the plan shifts major costs from Medicare to the elderly (median Medicare household income is only \$25,000) and erodes the Medicare program for all those who remain in it.⁷

To What End?

One might support the Ryan-Romney plan if it ensured a balanced budget fairly and quickly reduced the debt; but the non-partisan Congressional Budget Office calculates that, even under very rosy Ryan economic assumptions, the plan does not create a surplus *until the year 2040!*⁸ Moreover, the plan proposes but does not specify tax changes that will increase revenues to offset the tax benefits to the wealthy or many of the further cuts needed to reach targeted reduction goals. In economic terms alone, Reagan budget director David Stockman calls it a “fairy-tale budget plan”⁹ and Nobel economist Paul Krugman labels it “a joke” and “a triumph of style over substance.”¹⁰ As Robert Greenstein observes, “It need not be that way. In 1990, 1993, and 1997, policymakers enacted major deficit reduction packages that reduced deficits in a more balanced way, without increasing poverty.”¹¹

Most importantly, it is starkly immoral.

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- 5 Kelsey Merrick and James Horney, *Chairman Ryan Gets 62 Percent of His Huge Budget Cuts from Programs for Lower-Income Americans*, Center for Budget and Policy Priorities, March 23, 2012, pp. 2-3.
- 6 Edwin Park and Matt Broaddus, *Ryan Medicaid Block Grant Proposal Would Cut Medicaid by One-Third by 2022 and More After That*, Center for Budget and Policy Priorities, March 27, 2012, p. 1.
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- 8 Congressional Budget Office, *The Long-Term Budgetary Impact of Paths for Federal Revenues and Spending Specified by Chairman Ryan*, March 2012, p. 5.
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- 10 Paul Krugman, *An Unserious Man*, New York Times, August 20, 2012, p. A19.
- 11 Robert Greenstein, op.cit., p. 4.

“Impossible Subjects” with Impossible

New hope comes into a world of impossibility



Tania Matos, co-founder of DreamActivist Louisiana, is one of thousands of Gulf Coast youth eligible to apply for a work permit through the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program announced by the Obama Administration on June 15. Photo by Ted Jackson, courtesy of *The Times-Picayune*.

Mae Ngai posits in her landmark study of U.S. immigration from 1924 to 1965, *Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America* (2004), that numerical exclusion of persons wanting to emigrate to the United States, beginning in a comprehensive way with the Immigration Act of 1924 created a new class of persons within the country—illegal aliens, whose inclusion in the nation was “at once a social reality and a legal impossibility.” Barred from entry and therefore citizenship and with limited rights, the illegal alien, Ngai concludes, is thus an “impossible subject,” a person “who cannot be and a problem that cannot be solved.”¹

The paradoxes in our immigration laws that Ngai so skillfully deconstructs continue to have painful consequences for today’s undocumented immigrants and their families. Time and again our nation’s immigration laws have failed to address the need for immigrant labor and contradict long-cherished American values, resulting in impossible choices by undocumented immigrants. Since the passage of harsh anti-immigrant laws in 1996 and more recent state anti-immigrant laws, the impossible choices have been compounded.

The devolution of immigration enforcement to state and local police, for example, through 287(g) agreements pursuant to the 1996 Illegal Immigrant Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act (IIRIRA) and ICE’s Secure Communities Program, has led to a massive undermining of trust between immigrant communities and police officers whose job it is to protect all community residents. State anti-immigrant laws like Arizona’s SB 1070 and Alabama’s HB 56 continue the trend of turning local law enforcement into immigration agents. In June, the Supreme Court let stand the most controversial aspect of Arizona’s law, requiring police officers to investigate the immigration status of anyone they stop who they “suspect” may be undocumented.² As a direct consequence of these laws and policies, an immigrant woman suffering life-threatening abuse from her spouse or partner often faces an impossible choice. Should she call the police for protection and risk her or her partner being detained and deported, or should she continue to suffer abuse and risk injury or death?

What could be more devastating to society’s social fabric than enacting laws that separate parents from their children? But that is now the official policy of the U.S. government regarding millions of undocumented parents of U.S. children. Consider the impossible choices facing a couple in the New Orleans area. Tania Olivar, a U.S. citizen, fell in love and married Germano of Honduras 10 years ago. They had two children, started a painting business after Katrina, and bought a house. They were living the American Dream. He was a devoted father and husband and, as Tania explained, “We did everything together as a family.”³

As a national of Honduras, Germano had Temporary Protected Status (TPS), beginning about the time he met Tania in 2000. He renewed his status every year until a fateful visit to the local ICE office in 2010—suddenly he was arrested, shackled, and sent to a detention center four hours away in north Louisiana. Why? Because before he met Tania, and before he had obtained TPS, Germano had been picked up near the border and deported just days after entering the United States for the first time. He was stopped and deported again before he finally made his way to Louisiana.

Although he had not been technically eligible for TPS, how can that outweigh nearly 10 years of marriage and raising a family with not so much as a traffic ticket on his record? When they finally met with a U.S. visa official in Tegucigalpa two years after Germano was deported from Louisiana, they were told that he was subject to the 10-year bar on re-entry (another IIRIRA provision) and could not

Choices

By Sue Weishar, Ph.D.

re-enter the U.S for another eight years. By that time, his now three-year-old son will be 11, and his eight-year-old daughter will be 16! Can you imagine being banished from your children's lives for the most important years of their development? What social good is served by this? Tania had to go on public assistance, and her children weep for the father they miss every day of their lives.

Until recently, perhaps no group of immigrants faced a more impossible future than undocumented immigrants brought to the United States as children by their parents. Having grown up here, many know no other way of life and some barely speak the language of their birth country. American in every way but the paperwork, immigrants like Pulitzer Prize winning journalist Jose Antonio Vargas often had no idea they were undocumented until they applied for a driver's license. They were the subject of the failed December 2010 effort to pass the Dream Act to give them a path to citizenship.

Defined and trapped by their status, DREAMers did something remarkable—yet very American—they exercised traditional First Amendment rights to organize, protest, and “petition the government for a redress of grievances.” Their faith in their country's people and laws is beginning to bear fruit. President Obama announced the program now known as Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals on June 15, allowing undocumented students or high school graduates under age 31 who entered the U.S. before they were 16 and have lived here for five years to apply for work authorization and permission to stay for up to two years if they can pass a background check.⁴ The Migration Policy Institute estimates that 1.76 million unauthorized immigrants will be eligible for deferred

action⁵ and a chance to make what looked impossible—college, professional work, driving an automobile without fear of deportation—possible. Advocates throughout the Catholic network worked tirelessly to bring about such change, and now immigration legal service providers at Catholic Charities across the country are on the front-lines assisting young immigrants to apply for deferred action.

As we rejoice over the renewed hope that deferred action provides, we cannot forget the more than eight million immigrants⁶ who must continue to live in the shadows until Congress has the will to embrace comprehensive immigration reform. For those for whom deferred action falls short, perhaps the words of the Latino U.S. bishops will bring comfort and courage:

In your suffering faces we see the true face of Jesus Christ. We are well aware of the great sacrifice you make for your families' well-being. Many of you perform the most difficult jobs and receive miserable salaries and no health insurance or social security. Despite your contributions to the well-being of our country, instead of receiving our thanks, you are often treated as criminals because you have violated current immigration laws...

We urge you not to despair. Keep faith in Jesus the migrant who continues to walk beside you. Have faith in Our Lady of Guadalupe who constantly repeats to us the words she spoke to St. Juan Diego, “Am I, who am your mother, not here?” She never abandons us, nor does St. Joseph who protects us as he did the Holy Family during their migration to Egypt.⁷

For nothing is impossible with God.
(Luke 1:37)

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- 2 Although the Supreme Court refused to strike down Section 2B of Arizona's HB 1070, the majority did not find this provision to be immune from legal challenge. According to Immigration Policy Center's Ben Winograd, “the court found the provision [2B] so confusingly written that Arizona courts should have an opportunity to interpret it first.” See <http://www.csmonitor.com/Commentary/Opinion/2012/0626/Why-the-Supreme-Court-ruling-on-immigration-is-a-clear-rebuke-to-Arizona>
- 3 See an interview I conducted with Tania on August 27, 2011, in her home in Kenner, La., at http://movingforwardgc.org/advocacy_media_immigration.php. The video was recorded and edited by Moving Forward Gulf Coast.
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- 5 Jeanne Batalova and Michelle Mittelstadt, *Relief from Deportation: Demographic Profile of the DREAMers Potential Eligibility under Deferred Action Policy*, August, 2012, Migration Policy Institute at http://www.migrationpolicy.org/pubs/FS24_deferredaction.pdf
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Race and the 2012 Presidential Election

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