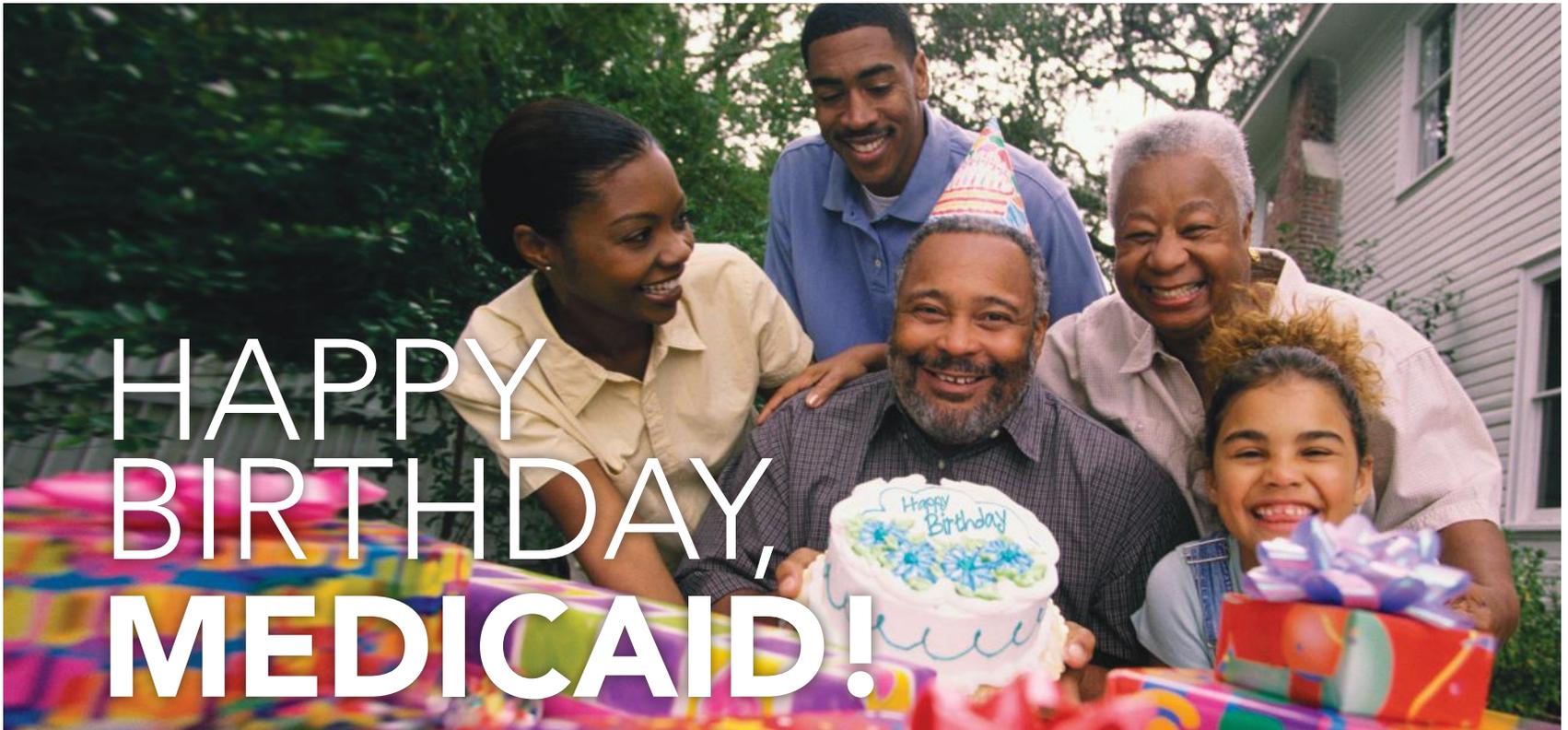


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HAPPY BIRTHDAY, MEDICAID!

The 50th Anniversary of Medicaid and Medicare

BY FRED KAMMER, S.J.

On July 30, 1965, President Lyndon B. Johnson signed into law the bill that led to the Medicare and Medicaid programs that we know today. Medicare is widely popular, especially among seniors, as the health insurance program that covers 52.3 million Americans: 43.5 million elders and 8.8 million people who are disabled.¹ Medicaid insures one in five Americans and one in three American children. Medicaid, as a “health welfare” program covering poor children, parents, elders, persons with disabilities, and others, continues to be controversial despite its many successes for the American people. This article traces its reach, impact, and costs.

Beneficiaries of Medicaid

As reported by the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities (CBPP),² the Medicaid program reached 80 million low-income Americans in 2014 with essential health care services. This included 31 million children, 19 million adults (most of whom

were low-income working parents), 5 million seniors (many of whom receive nursing home care), and 9 million persons with disabilities. In terms of participation, 87.2 percent of the children who are eligible for Medicaid or the Children’s Health Insurance Program (CHIP) participate in the program, as do 65.6 percent of low-income adults with children who are eligible under the program guidelines.

In the Gulf South, Medicaid helps 11,677,200 persons, a majority of whom are children, elderly, or persons with disabilities:³

AREA	Total Beneficiaries	Children	Elders	Persons with Disabilities
Alabama	1,062,400	540,600	118,000	221,600
Florida	3,703,400	1,897,500	470,200	573,700
Louisiana	1,285,400	678,800	117,100	237,300
Mississippi	781,700	407,200	90,000	170,800
Texas	4,844,300	3,124,700	447,300	636,000
Gulf South	11,677,200	6,648,800	1,242,600	1,839,400

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HAPPY BIRTHDAY, MEDICAID!

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Benefits of Medicaid Coverage

The benefits of Medicaid coverage vary for different beneficiaries and at different ages:

First, Medicaid enrollment means that extremely low-income persons have health coverage that they could not otherwise afford for ordinary and chronic conditions.

A landmark study in Oregon found that Medicaid beneficiaries were 40 percent less likely to have suffered a decline in health in the previous six months than similar people without health coverage. They also were more likely to “use preventive care (such as cholesterol screenings), to have a regular clinic where they could receive primary care, and to receive a diagnosis of and treatment for depression and diabetes.”⁴

Second, as Americans age, Medicaid has provided many with multiple options for care. It allows more seniors and people with disabilities to get the long-term care they need in nursing homes. For others, it has given them the chance to remain in their local communities instead of moving to a nursing home by providing access to other forms of in-home care.⁵

Third, Medicaid has cut infant mortality significantly. “The program’s coverage of pregnant women and children has been a major factor in reducing the country’s infant mortality rate—from 26 of every 1,000 births in 1960 to 6.1 in 2010.”⁶

Fourth, Medicaid coverage of children has long-term benefits across their lifespans. A recent study from Georgetown University showed three distinct results of Medicaid coverage for children: (a) a 26 percent decline in the incidence of high blood pressure in adulthood, as well as lower rates

of hospitalizations and emergency room visits in adulthood, and lower rates among adolescents of eating disorders, use of alcohol, and mortality; (b) a 9.7 percent decline in high school dropouts, and a 5.5 percent increase in graduation rates from college; and (c) higher incomes



later in life, greater economic mobility, incomes exceeding their parents, less reliance on safety net programs, and increased tax contributions.⁷

Costs and Cost Effectiveness

Medicaid is funded by a combination of federal and state revenues. The federal government sets minimum standards for coverage, including the categories of people that all states must cover. Besides these minimum requirements, states determine whom they cover, what benefits they provide, and how they deliver health care services. As a result, Medicaid eligibility and costs vary substantially from state to state.

The federal share of the costs or “matching rate,” which has been largely unchanged for some years, is based on a formula that considers state economic conditions.⁸ Total spending for Medicaid by federal and state governments (and U.S. territories), including administrative costs, in Fiscal Year 2014 was \$492.3 billion—60 percent from the federal government and 40 percent on average from the states, although in some

states the federal share was as high as 70 percent.⁹ This compares to \$583.9 billion total expenditures (in FY 2013) for the Medicare program, which covers more than 25 million fewer people.¹⁰

In general, Medicaid administrative expenses are lower than private health insurance and have increased at a lower rate.¹¹ Medicaid’s costs per beneficiary are substantially lower than for private health insurance and have been growing more slowly, as well. Medicaid benefits are more comprehensive than private insurance with significantly lower out-of-pocket costs for beneficiaries. Medicaid’s lower payment rates to health care providers and lower administrative costs make the program very efficient, although lower payments

to providers cause some doctors and others to refuse to participate in the program. It costs Medicaid much less than private insurance to cover people of similar health status.¹²

From the point of view of Medicaid’s low-income beneficiaries, Medicaid coverage has an economic benefit as well. In 2010, for example, Medicaid raised 2.6 million people out of poverty, which is equivalent to a 0.7 percent drop in the poverty rate. According to CBPP: “Research from Oregon’s Medicaid program also shows that beneficiaries were 40 percent less likely to go into medical debt or leave other bills unpaid in order to cover medical expenses, and that Medicaid coverage nearly eliminated catastrophic out-of-pocket medical costs.”¹³

The health and economic benefits would be even greater if the five Gulf South states (and about 18 others) were to avail themselves of the significant expansion in Medicaid provided for under the Affordable Care Act and funded almost totally with federal dollars.

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Catholic Social Thought and Government

In 1986 the U.S. Bishops summarized Catholic teaching on government: "...the teachings of the Church insist that government has a moral function: protecting human rights and securing basic justice for all members of the commonwealth."¹ The bishops explained that, while all people have responsibility for the common good, government's role is to guarantee the minimum conditions for rich social activity, namely "human rights and justice."

Governmental responsibility includes assisting and empowering the poor and disadvantaged, generating employment and establishing fair labor practices, guaranteeing the economy's infrastructure, regulating trade and commerce, and levying "the taxes necessary to meet these responsibilities."² All are elements of government's responsibility for the common good.

Catholic thought also frames government's role as the second of three major sectors of the good society. The economic marketplace is the first sector, described by Pope Benedict XVI as the institution "that permits encounter between persons, inasmuch as they are economic subjects who make use of contracts to regulate their relations as they exchange goods and services of equivalent value between them, in order to satisfy their needs and desires."³

As the second sector, government has responsibility for directing the economic activity of the first sector toward the common good.⁴ This includes creating the juridical framework necessary for an effective and efficient market; protecting the rights of all those involved, including workers, businesses, and consumers; and cushioning the market's worst aspects. Grave imbalances are produced, Benedict wrote, "when economic action, conceived merely as an engine for wealth creation, is detached from political action, conceived as a means for pursuing justice through redistribution."⁵

Pope Benedict and his predecessors emphasized the importance of a third sector—civil society—which St. John Paul II saw "as the most natural setting for an economy of gratuitousness and fraternity..."⁶ In this country, in addition to individuals, families, and groups, civil society includes the "voluntary" or "nonprofit sector."

With regard to civil society, subsidiarity should circumscribe government action. This means encouraging voluntary and cooperative endeavors in the cultural, social, religious, artistic, and intellectual spheres and their impact on the social dimension of persons, without absorbing their functions. Civil society, in turn, provides a powerful counterweight to the centralizing tendencies of government.⁷

International Political Authority

Catholic social thought also addresses the role of governments in an increasingly globalized world. Pope Benedict acknowledged that, "the State finds itself having to address the limitations to its sovereignty imposed by the new context of international trade and finance, which is characterized by increasing mobility both of financial capital and means of production, material and immaterial."⁸ This has altered states' political power and calls for a re-evaluation of state roles. Rather than "being too precipitous in declaring the demise of the State," however, Benedict suggested that, after the recent great recession, the state's role seems destined to grow in working toward resolution.⁹ Moreover, governments must collaborate more to deal with a transnational integrated economy¹⁰ and support a stronger and reformed United Nations and other international institutions.¹¹

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- ¹ National Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Economic Justice for All*, 1986, no. 122, citing Pope John XXIII, *Pacem in Terris*, 1963, nos. 60-62.
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- ³ Pope Benedict XVI, *Caritas in Veritate*, 2009, no. 38.
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Caught in the Middle

American Citizens Denied Birth Certificates in Texas

BY JEANIE DONOVAN, M.P.A., M.P.H.



Photo by
Rev. Patrick Delahanty.

Birthright citizenship, referred to in legal doctrine as *jus soli*, is a well-established constitutional right in the United States. It has, however, come under scrutiny in reaction to the recent influx of immigrants from Mexico and Central America. Conservative presidential candidates, elected officials, and pundits have commented on the need to restrict birthright citizenship to stem the flow of immigrants.¹ Although it is a constitutional right that would require federal action to change, states have taken calculated steps to restrict the clearly defined right to citizenship established by the Fourteenth Amendment.

In Texas, officials have implemented a policy that denies access to birth certificates to children born in Texas to undocumented parents. The policy prompted a federal lawsuit, and a judge will soon determine the constitutionality and legality of Texas' actions. In the meantime, perhaps Texas officials should give consideration to Pope Francis' teachings on injustice.

In his recent address to Congress, Pope Francis addressed the divisiveness of such discriminatory behavior toward immigrants and urged leaders to redirect their efforts. He said: "Even in the developed world, the effects of unjust structures and actions are all too apparent. Our efforts must aim at restoring hope, righting wrongs, maintaining commitments, and thus promoting the well-being of individuals and of peoples."²

The pontiff went on to remark about the immigrants who are

journeying to the U.S. seeking safety and economic opportunity for themselves and their families. He then asked listeners a poignant question: "On this continent, too, thousands of persons are led to travel north in search of a better life for themselves and for their loved ones, in search of greater opportunities. Is this not what we want for our own children?"³

At the heart of Pope Francis' message is the concept of solidarity—a core principle of Catholic social teaching that requires us to ignore arbitrary political or geographic borders when it comes to ensuring the well-being of the vulnerable and promoting the common good. Hateful rhetoric and policies not only are harmful to immigrants and their families but also detract from the social cohesiveness and economic success of our country.

In Texas, for example, the actions taken by state officials aim to marginalize a vulnerable group of people who contribute greatly to the state's

economic and social fabric. Nearly 3 million non-citizen immigrants live in Texas, composing 11 percent of the state's total population.⁴ Another 1.5 million foreign-born Texans are legal, naturalized citizens.⁵ Most relevant to the current legal battle in Texas are the 2 million U.S.-born Texas children who are part of mixed-status families, in which one or both of their parents have no legal authorization.⁶ These children and the future children of non-citizen immigrants in Texas are at great risk under the state's current policy. Although the issuance of a birth certificate does not establish or negate one's citizenship, it is needed to enjoy the rights and privileges associated with citizenship.

A New Policy

At the root of the battle in Texas is a debate over what forms of identification may be used by non-citizen parents to obtain birth certificates for their Texas-born children. Recent internal policy changes made by the state's Department of State Health Services (DSHS) have disallowed the use of Mexican passports to obtain birth certificates unless the passport holder has a current U.S. visa. DSHS officials also unilaterally banned, without a change in state statute or rule, the use of the *matricula consular*, a photo ID issued by Mexican consulates to Mexican citizens living the United States, to obtain a child's birth certificate. Now parents who easily obtained birth certificates for their older Texas-born children with identification issued by the Mexican government cannot get a birth certificate for their younger children.

The Impact

The inability to obtain a birth certificate presents myriad challenges to immigrants and their children. Not having the document creates a barrier to having newborns baptized, enrolling children in daycare and school, and enrolling in Medicaid coverage or other government services for their families. These challenges leave children's well-being hanging in the balance as their parents and attorneys wage a legal battle against state officials who refuse to acknowledge the problematic nature of the policy.⁷ It is impossible to prove the true motivation for the shift in policy, but advocates like Ann Williams Cass, executive director of Proyecto Azteca in McAllen, believe that it is a politically driven policy that will have harmful impacts. Cass notes that Texas has a legal obligation to provide a free education to all children in the state. It makes economic sense then, she argues, for the state to ensure that Texas-born children can enjoy the benefits of citizenship, including the ability to obtain children's health insurance. Otherwise, it creates a humanitarian problem that also could lead to serious public health issues.

Additionally, the marginalization of the immigrant community in Texas via discriminatory policies ignores the reality that they contribute greatly to the state's economy. Immigrants make up one-fifth of the Texas population that is working age, and immigrants aged 16 and older are more likely than their white counterparts to be participating in the workforce.⁸ Through small business entrepreneurship and their contributions to the workforce, immigrants provide a significant portion of the state's tax revenue. Estimates by the Institute for Taxation and Economic Policy found that in 2012, unauthorized immigrants in Texas paid an estimated \$1.5 billion in state and local taxes.⁹ Projections indicate that immigrants and descendants of immigrants will continue to grow as a proportion of the total population in Texas.¹⁰ Creating barriers to their social and economic security will only hamper the state's prosperity.

Demanding Justice

The actions of Texas officials have symbolic and person-level impacts that obstruct constitutional rights afforded citizens and put young persons born in the state at risk. The citizens of Texas, their elected officials, faith-based leaders, and community leaders should not tolerate this affront to immigrants and their children. It is vital that those in positions of power act and spur others to act to advocate for the innocent children in their communities who are caught in the middle of an ideological battle. After all, isn't that what one would do for his or her own child?

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- ⁹ Institute on Taxation and Economic Policy, *Undocumented Immigrants' State and Local Tax Contributions* (2012) available at http://itep.org/itep_reports/2015/04/undocumented-immigrants-state-local-tax-contributions.php#Vhf04BNViko
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Pope Francis' Address to Congress

A Strategic American Political Theology

BY ALEX MIKULICH, PH.D.

Pope Francis' historic address to a Joint Session of the U.S. Congress on September 24, 2015, addressed three fundamental crises.

First, he addresses an ecological crisis in which the very life of the planet is threatened. Then, he presents a socio-economic crisis in which the benefits of society tend to flow to the top while the poorest and most vulnerable among us bear ever-increasing and death-dealing burdens. Finally, he poses a spiritual-cultural crisis in which disconnections between persons and nature, between the self and others,

and between the self and authentic human and ecological development, that is, the fullest potential of one and all, block transformation necessary for the future.

These crises demand a theological vision rooted in spiritual practice equal to the task, that is, a strategy that offers a way out of the social, political, economic, and ecological impasses that endanger "our common home." Pope Francis boldly offers, I suggest, a strategic American political theology and spirituality for our time.

His address is provocative, not because he reiterates the major principles of Catholic social teaching well (he does), but for the way he frames his invitation to dialogue about the great crises of our time around four great Americans: Abraham Lincoln, Martin Luther King Jr., Dorothy Day, and Thomas Merton.

It is striking that in a major address to Congress emphasizing faithful political leadership and citizenship for the common good, the Pope cites only one American—Abraham Lincoln—who devoted his life to formal public office. In contrast, Martin Luther King Jr., Dorothy Day, and Thomas Merton each devoted themselves, in their unique ways, to the "least of these" (MT 25:40). As Pope Francis invites in the *Joy of the Gospel* (*Evangelii Gaudium*, #48), "I prefer a Church that is bruised, hurting, and dirty because it has been out on the streets, rather than a Church that is unhealthy by being confined and clinging to its own security." King, Day, and Merton each risked, indeed sacrificed, their whole lives for the most vulnerable members of the Mystical Body of Christ.

Pope Francis begins by quoting one of the classic statements of American

democracy, President Lincoln's Gettysburg Address. This frames the Pope's "political" approach, not as narrowly partisan but as the shared pursuit of a people to enjoy the fruits of freedom for one and all. Pope Francis recalls Lincoln's immortal call "to have a new birth of freedom." A "new birth of freedom" Lincoln affirmed, depends upon "us, the living...to be dedicated here to the unfinished work which they who fought here have thus far so nobly advanced." Pope Francis calls us to the unfinished work of caring for the most vulnerable creatures among us, human and non-human, in our one and common home, the earth.

Yet liberty is not enough. If freedom is real and authentic—that is human—it must be equitable.

Pope Francis recalls "the march Martin Luther King led from Selma to Montgomery 50 years ago as part of the campaign to fulfill his 'dream' of full civil and political rights for African Americans. That dream continues to inspire us all." The Pope re-awakens us to the way dreams touch "the deepest and truest in the life of the people."

Such a re-awakening demands that we too march with the most vulnerable among us across the symbolic and practical bridges that have yet to be built for true freedom and equality. Pope Francis re-awakens us to remember how many of our ancestors were once migrants seeking freedom and that we must "educate new generations not to turn their backs on our 'neighbors' and everything

around us." The Pope reminds us that "the first contacts were often turbulent and violent" and that "we must not repeat the sins and errors of the past."

Pope Francis turns our attention to two Catholic Americans, Dorothy Day and Thomas Merton. "In these times when social concerns are so important," says Pope Francis, "I cannot fail to mention the Servant of God Dorothy Day who founded the Catholic Worker movement. Her social activism, her passion for justice and for the cause of the oppressed, were inspired by the Gospel, her faith, and the example of the saints."

Drawing upon Day's passionate and integrated care for the poor and the earth, Pope Francis stresses that the "great effort" today is the

Pope Francis calls us to the unfinished work of caring for the most vulnerable creatures among us, human and non-human, in our one and common home, the earth.

"creation and distribution of wealth." This great effort must attend to the "right use of natural resources and the proper application of technology and the proper harnessing of the spirit of enterprise" in a way that is both "inclusive and sustainable." The Catholic Worker movement continues to passionately witness Day's practices of inclusivity and sustainability.

Pope Francis concludes with Merton, underscoring the need for a fundamental orientation away from our selfish human desires and toward God. Pope Francis highlights how Merton's own conversion to prayer and contemplation enabled him to "challenge the certitudes of his time and opened new horizons for souls and the Church."

It is instructive how Martin Luther King Jr. knew that he needed time in prayer and contemplation with Thomas Merton. Indeed, the historian Albert Raboteau records how at the time of his assassination "plans were underway for Martin Luther King to make a retreat with Thomas Merton at Our Lady of Gethsemane Abbey."¹

While King and Merton were not able to meet, Pope Francis calls us to root our work for liberty, equality, inclusion, and sustainability in prayerful contemplation and dialogue.

Pope Francis, I believe, offers us a rich vision and practice of a political theology and spirituality built upon four cornerstones of liberty, equality, inclusion and sustainability, and contemplation and dialogue.

May we take up this vision and practice, drawing upon the wisdom of these four great Americans so that we may yet realize our common destiny to thrive in the unity of God's creation—our one common home.

ENDNOTES

¹ Albert Raboteau, *A Fire in the Bones: Reflections on African American Religious History*, Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1995. p. 166.



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