

Rep. Ryan goes all social-teaching-ish

By [Steve Thorngate](#)

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Like a lot of people, I've been paying less attention this year to the federal budget debates. With a divided government and a presidential election looming, the balance is tilted even more than usual toward budgeting-as-mere-political-posture. Why bother?

Well, Ezra Klein's [been making a good case lately](#) that we should pay attention because budget proposals, unlike most everything else that happens in Washington, represent a moment "when politicians stop talking and put numbers down on a page." So they give an uncommon flash of clarity as to what, besides reelection, all the disagreement in Washington is actually about. (You may also have heard at some point that they are [moral documents](#).)

Congressman Paul Ryan and other House Republicans aren't necessarily on a mission to gut programs that support low-income Americans; it's arguably just the collateral damage of a gesture toward fulfilling their ambitious and often contradictory promises. (A distinction that's small comfort if your Medicaid, food stamps or financial aid is at risk.) In any case, that's what their budget does, [and how](#). And now Ryan's [telling CBN](#) that it's his *faith* that leads him to want to get the feds out of anti-poverty work:

To me, the principle of subsidiarity, which is really federalism, meaning government closest to the people governs best, having a civil society ... where we, through our civic organizations, through our churches, through our charities, through all of our different groups where we interact with people as a community, that's how we advance the common good.

Leave aside that Ryan moves from subsidiarity to federalism to let-the-churches-handle-it in a hot second (along with, to be fair, an ellipse). The problem with collapsing the federal safety net in the name of subsidiarity is that this particular Catholic social teaching simply demands more. [Here's my colleague David Heim](#),

from back when subsidiarity+Santorum was a trending topic:

Subsidiarity is a fertile idea, though more suggestive than prescriptive. It's hard to pin down what subsidiarity actually means, apart from some extreme cases. (Yes, we can agree that the federal government shouldn't decide what families eat for breakfast or when neighborhoods hold their block parties or who should teach seventh grade.)

Most users of the term tend to forget one crucial element of the subsidiarity principle: larger organizations are always obligated to step in to coordinate or supplement the activities of smaller organizations when such action is necessary to protect human rights and serve the common good. John Paul II made this point explicitly when invoking subsidiarity in his 1991 encyclical [*Centesimus Annus*](#).

Subsidiarity, in short, means not just taking care of things at as local a level as possible but also *actually taking care of them*. It's hard to see how deep cuts--sorry, "[repairs](#)"--to safety-net programs can accomplish this.

In the CBN interview, Ryan also invoked preferential-option language:

[T]he preferential option for the poor, which is one of the primary tenants of Catholic social teaching, means don't keep people poor, don't make people dependent on government so that they stay stuck at their station in life, help people get out of poverty out onto life of independence.

Don't keep people poor, don't make them depend on government--that's truly an astonishing pivot. Yes, yes, anti-poverty work should offer a hand up, not just a handout. But how ideologically myopic do you have to be to collapse this distinction into the debate over the role of government, as if private efforts always promote justice while public efforts are always content with charity? In what universe does cutting Pell Grants constitute replacing a culture of dependency with an effort to lift people out of poverty?

Anyway. Again, it's not like this particular budget is ever going to become law. But Klein's right that it's a chance to see what talking points look like when they're made

concrete. They don't look pretty. (And be sure to [read Klein](#) on the gap between Ryan's budget and the [inequality speech](#) he gave in October.)

Also: If your main response to budget talk is "yes, but what about our unsustainable national debt?" then you should try this [debt-stabilization simulator](#). It's great wonk-fun: "Congratulations!" says [my PDF report/sort-of award certificate](#). "You reduced the debt to below 60% of GDP in 2021, and kept it at a sustainable level through 2030." And I did it without reducing the charitable giving deduction, or restoring pre-Bush tax levels for incomes under \$70,000 (in the world I live in, a comfortable middle-class income). I even had room to spend *more* on foreign aid, veteran benefits, transportation funding and jobs!

You're welcome, Congress. Feel free to to convert this into legislative language and pass it straightaway. No need to put my name on it; I've got no election-season promises to keep, ludicrous or otherwise.