What Seems to Be a Morally-Mandated Public Policy Position Really May Not Be
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This was one of SCSS President Stephen M. Krason’s “Neither Left nor Right, but Catholic” columns that appeared during 2014 in Crisismagazine.com and The Wanderer and at his blog site (skrason.wordpress.com). It discusses how Catholic social teaching does not mandate particular public policies, which must not be confused with points of the teaching itself. It emphasizes that there can typically be many different policy approaches that can be used to make sure that moral demands are met.

Two recent newspaper articles—one in the Catholic and the other in the secular press—illustrate the need to be skeptical about claims that particular public policy approaches are morally necessary. Both discussed recent federal legislative efforts: one to raise the minimum wage, the other to cut food stamp benefits (the legislation that ultimately passed did so slightly). Both involve helping the economically disadvantaged. Concern for the poor is certainly a Christian obligation. The universal destination of created goods and a just wage are basic principles of Catholic social teaching and the right to life and the means necessary for its development (such as food, shelter, medical care, etc.) is at the top of the list of human rights stressed by the popes. The problem is that policies cannot be made synonymous with a moral principle itself, or held to be essential to achieving it.

This confusion was made manifest right in the title of the Catholic press article, which was from the Catholic News Service and appeared in my diocesan newspaper: “Calls to Hike Minimum Wage Echo Long-Standing Catholic Social Teaching.” A Fordham University professor was quoted as suggesting that Catholics have to support a minimum wage increase. In truth, nowhere in the papal social encyclicals does it say that laws mandating a minimum wage are morally required. The article mentioned how the Church in the U.S. has long made this a legislative priority and while acknowledging that a minimum wage is not a living wage, nevertheless proceeded to discuss it as if it were. It virtually outright dismissed any arguments against the current proposed increase—to say nothing of the issue of whether minimum wage legislation generally is a good idea—by quoting a University of Illinois professor who is a political scientist and

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labor relations scholar and activist (and not an economist) that “there is no argument not to increase the minimum wage.”

The other article talked about how physicians were warning that a cut in the food stamp program would certainly cause health problems for the poor and an increase in health care costs that would be borne by government. So, if the taxpayers did not ante up now they would have to do so later. It quoted two physicians, one who heads a children’s health advocacy organization and another a medical professor, who respectively called the proposal to cut food stamps “dumb” and “sort of ridiculous.”

Besides absolutizing policy approaches—basically suggesting that if these policies were not in place and, in fact, not expanded it would be immoral and damaging to people’s welfare—the articles illustrated several other problems with how public policy is thought about. First, of course, is the familiar tendency to shut down any opposing or different ideas about how to address the questions at hand and, more, to demonize anyone who dares to propose them (they are “dumb” or “ridiculous”). We even at times witness some orthodox Catholics who are quick to brand anyone who raises questions about a policy like the minimum wage as a “neoliberal” (with the implication that he’s a dissenter from Catholic social teaching). As is so often the case, neither article examined the question sufficiently. While the one on the minimum wage mentioned the argument that increases could lead to business closings and job loss, it quickly dismissed it. It never considered that that could also present a moral problem. It also failed to note that teenagers, students, and second wage earners in a family hold most minimum wage jobs. The article’s suggestion that hiking the minimum wage will help alleviate poverty seems to have ignored the fact that two-thirds of those categorized as impoverished do not work at all, so a minimum wage increase *ipso facto* would not help them. It didn’t consider that the biggest beneficiaries might be suburban teenagers from better-off families in after-school jobs. For all of its attempt to make minimum wage laws look like an imperative of Catholic social teaching, the writer of the article seemed impervious to the fact that the country that did much to inspire the development of the Church’s modern social teaching, Germany, has no general minimum wage (though there is a vague legal provision prohibiting an “immoral wage”). Mostly, minimum wages there are set by collective bargaining agreements. In fact, several other countries also have alternatives to minimum wage laws.

One of the problems of Catholic activists and even spokesmen for the Church in the U.S. who promote something like minimum wage laws is that they seem to grab for it just because “that’s what’s out there.” They also have bought into the standard American mentality—especially pro-
nounced on the left, of course—that there’s always a legislative solution to a problem. The issue is compounded here because they haven’t even defined sufficiently the problem they are trying to solve (as the article’s statements about poverty make clear). Indeed, if addressing poverty is what’s important, why did the article say nothing about the problems of single parenthood, illegitimacy, and family breakdown (that is, issues involving personal conduct)—which are major contributing factors to poverty? Before being so ready to embrace a legislative solution, did they reflect about the greatest example of a programmatic failure to solve the poverty problem, LBJ’s “War on Poverty” whose fiftieth anniversary we’re now celebrating? Do they devote any effort to other ways to build up what might be called a “just-wage culture,” such as by actively promoting sound business ethics?

Minimum wage laws may indeed be necessary. I have not been an anti-minimum wage advocate. It’s a problem, however, when people don’t even want to debate such an issue, or dismiss out-of-hand serious questions raised about it, or implicitly insist that one thing is the only workable policy approach, or try to claim that this or any policy approach is an imperative of Catholic social teaching instead of acknowledging that it, despite its eighty-year history, is a matter of prudential judgment.

The article on cutting the food stamp program (by the Associated Press), besides making claims of consequences about which solid evidence of a clear cause-and-effect relationship might be hard to come by, similarly saw no other way to address an aspect of poverty. While mentioning private food banks—which it claimed were overstretched—this one federal program operating at a certain level seemed to be the only real solution. Again, there was no mention of single parenthood and the other problems that contribute to poverty. Nothing was said about personal conduct in any way being a factor. While talking a lot about the adverse effects on children, none of the spokesmen or activists quoted said anything about the increasing trend of young, able-bodied male adults to be on the food stamp rolls or about whether it might be problematical in some way that almost 50 million Americans are now on food stamps. The spiraling costs to the American taxpayer seemed to be a non-issue. They seemed impervious to the conditions under which those categorized as impoverished in the U.S. are living: 80 percent have air conditioning, 92 percent have a microwave, 70 percent have a VCR, two-thirds have cable or satellite TV, more than half of “poor” families with children have a video game system, etc. Why could those with genuine food needs not be sufficiently helped by expanded private and charitable efforts? Do they know for sure that additional private funds are not available? Were efforts to help those truly
in need of adequate food before the food stamp program was started under LBJ insufficient? It may have been the same as with health care for the poor. Great Society-era policymakers just assumed—without adequately researching it—that the poor needed a national program (Medicaid), when in fact there was an enormous amount of charity care available.

So the food stamp article also was a shallow examination of both that program and the broader topic of poverty that it’s part of and also showed a fixation on one kind of policy approach—carried out at the highest level, the federal government.

Having seen the problems of these two major public policies—and doubtless many other current economic and social welfare policies—is there an alternative? That obviously requires careful examination of the subject, giving heed to tough questions and uncomfortable facts, and engaging in sober-minded reflection and consideration of different courses of action—the very things I’ve said are not much being done. Ideology, perceptions, truisms, a sense of moral righteousness, and just a plain fixation on a certain way of thinking seem, rather, to rule. As a result, the contingent becomes the absolute, and mere policy choices are confused with moral truth.