

Understanding Paul Ryan's Idea of Subsidiarity

By Kevin Clarke

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Ayn Rand said in the appendix to *Atlas Shrugged*, its awfulness in print so profound, it could only be exceeded by its terribleness on celluloid: “My philosophy, in essence, is the concept of man as a heroic being, with his own happiness as the moral purpose of his life, with productive achievement as his noblest activity, and reason as his only absolute.”

Pope Francis has also had some things to say about a purpose-driven life: “If we love God and our brothers and sisters, we walk in the light; but if our heart is closed, if we are dominated by pride, deceit, self-seeking, then darkness falls within us and around us. “Whoever hates his brother—writes the Apostle John—is in the darkness; he walks in the darkness, and does not know the way to go, because the darkness has blinded his eyes” (1 Jn 2:11).

Some may believe that we are engaged in a great battle next month to save the soul of the nation, but, I put it to you my brothers and sisters, I'd say that we are first in a battle to save one soul and then it will be so much easier to save everything and everyone else. Ayn Rand and Pope Francis, and now us battling for the soul of one man, Paul Ryan, I suspect the darkness has fallen around Paul. He needs direction to the light.

We have to save Paul Ryan, save him from his advisors, save him from his sponsors, save him from his abettors, maybe even save him from himself.

And he so wants to be saved. He has been crying out to us for help. So many signs...How many times has he denied Ayn Rand now? Twice, thrice? In these increasingly desperate disavowals, I hear someone perhaps a little embarrassed about his past, someone seeking a way to move beyond it, someone still trapped in it though. He has found some things to like in an old, nearly forgotten lover, his Catholic faith. How can we get him to like just a little bit more about it?

The folks I work for, the Jesuits, urge us to find God in all things, to find God in all people. The Jesuits maintain a practice, or at least, try to maintain a practice, it's not that easy, called the “presupposition.”

The Presupposition suggests that when we find ourselves in conflict, “Let it be presupposed that every good Christian ought to be more eager to put a good interpretation on a neighbor's statement than to condemn it.” The presupposition has been described as “one of the secrets of success of Jesuit works down through the centuries.”

The presupposition is a daily practice that simply suggests striving not to assume the worst about other people in the words they use, the things they say, to look for the good, to look for God, in what they may be trying to do, to not be so arrogant as to grasp your own rightness so firmly that it is a detriment to listening, ultimately a detriment to seeing and finding the good in others.

Let me clarify here that while I may strive for that, I surely fail as often as I succeed. My own confidence in the rightness of my perceptions and what I believe are the best ambitions for a merciful and just civil and political order has often proved an obstacle to listening and learning from other people. Still does, may always.

It sure feels like we are not doing enough of that listening and learning in our civic and political life today. It often seems as if the opposite were more true, that instead of presupposing the good, we look for the bad in what our political leaders—from local to federal—are saying or doing and we assume the worst intentions about them. Lord knows our current political culture suggests that this is the safest, pre-emptive course, but it is not a merciful one or a kind one or ultimately perhaps the most productive one.

And, politically conservative or liberal or somewhere in between, Catholics are not wholly creatures of the American political culture though we are surely called to participate in it. We are a piece of the American civic life, but we are also part of another community, we are joined mystically together, we are a church together. We share these pews; we share this faith.

It is up to us to define how we are church together in a time of intensifying political discord; it is up to us to prevent the patterns and prejudices of American political life from insinuating themselves into how we relate together as a church. We are not a partisan community; we are the people of God.

Holding tight to such a commitment, we may end up fooled, we may end up frustrated, even scammed, but let us not begin there at least, aping the worse aspects of our political life within our church.

So allow me not to presuppose the worst intentions of my brother Paul Ryan. I want to start off by saying some nice things about Paul Ryan.

Here is what I am willing to grant Paul Ryan right off the bat, that when he says he is motivated by his faith in the social policies he promotes, he is being sincere; that when he says he is as mindful and concerned with mitigating the plight of the poor and vulnerable members of our society, he is also being sincere and is worth taking at his word.

In this ambition, it is fair to say he does not have all the right answers, perhaps he is not even asking the right questions, but I have to also entertain the faint possibility that I may not also have a lock on social and political wisdom. That maybe he has a different way of doing that, one I should be attentive to. Do I care how human suffering is mitigated, nature restored and protected and the common good promoted or simply that these pressing matters are addressed and the common good achieved? I don't. I'm not an ideologue.

When he became speaker, Paul Ryan spoke of his plan to build a confident America, a future that would benefit all Americans even the poor whom he no longer disparaged as mere takers:

“There are the millions of people stuck in neutral: 6 million people who have no choice but to work part time, 45 million people living in poverty,” he said. “Conservatives need to have an answer to this—because we do not write people off in this country. We just don’t.”

I’m glad to hear he feels this way, so do I. But what do we do about it?

In an interview with the National Catholic Register, not reporter, he explained that to him the preferential option for the poor suggests that “your poverty-fighting strategies should give focus to treating not symptoms, but root causes.” I couldn’t agree more, though I hope he feels symptoms like hunger or homelessness are not exactly something we have to distastefully pass over.

He told the other NCR, “That is where I think we have lost our way as a country, because, in treating symptoms, we have pursued solidarity but abused subsidiarity. And these are principles that are interconnected, and people of good will can debate within the sphere of where the balance between those two principles occurs.

“But if you just have solidarity without subsidiarity, you end up with big government and rank materialism. And so we need to make sure we keep an eye on revitalizing those civil mediating institutions, those institutions in our society that exist between the person and their government, which are in their community and where we work through our good works as people to advance the common good. And that’s where I think we’ve seen atrophy.”

I think those are criticisms worth hearing and they suggest to me that Paul Ryan has indeed done some thinking about the practical implications of Catholic social teaching. He still falls short of a complete grasp of its implications. That notion of his on balancing subsidiarity and solidarity for instance, is problematic. Theologian Vincent Miller, writing in America hit on the problem with the idea of balancing the two great Ss of Catholic social teaching. That’s not quite how it works. They are not in competition with each other, one meant to be bounced and balanced against the other. They are integrated, interrelated a pas de deux, they don’t work one without the other. Subsidiarity is deployed as an expression of solidarity, not as its substitute or its counterweight.

But it’s a start no? That he uses those words.

Paul Ryan and I share a faith of mercy and compassion, one that requires watching out for the other guy. The beliefs which unite us then offers me the hope that we can find some common ground toward the common good when it comes to the important policy questions of our times and the national priority-setting we establish together as fellow citizens of this republic.

In this regard, his responsibility, and his burden, are far greater than mine; I need to be mindful of how easy it is to criticize from outside the maelstrom of American political life. I can only feel a little sorry for those in the middle of that storm and I would like to offer them a little affirmation, to believe first that their intentions are decent and honorable until they provide sufficient evidence that this is not so.

Though he was accused by some of living in a dream world, let me say I admired a few of the things Paul Ryan said last March. Commenting on the woeful state of our national political culture, he tried to revive the perhaps flagging idealism of these American young people in a brief dialogue with the incoming House interns—one that may have also been intended for the ears of the exasperated or the guilty within his own party. As many in the youthful crowd no doubt struggled to remember or even comprehend the era of bipartisan civility Ryan described, the Speaker assured them it could one day return and acknowledged that his own deportment in the recent past may not have been exemplary.

“In a confident America,” Ryan said, “we aren’t afraid to disagree with each other” he told these young people.

“We don’t lock ourselves in an echo chamber, where we take comfort in the dogmas and opinions we already hold. We don’t shut down on people—and we don’t shut people down.

“If someone has a bad idea, we tell them why our idea is better. We don’t insult them into agreeing with us. We try to persuade them. We test their assumptions. And while we’re at it, we test our own assumptions too.”

You can’t be an idealist without a few ideals I guess. Would that this were true.

Here is where his speech became especially interesting to me:

“I’m certainly not going to stand here and tell you I have always met this standard,” he told this bipartisan crowd of one would hope not yet cynical interns. “There was a time when I would talk about a difference between ‘makers’ and ‘takers’ in our country,

referring to people who accepted government benefits. But as I spent more time listening, and really learning the root causes of poverty, I realized I was wrong.

“Takers’ wasn’t how to refer to a single mom stuck in a poverty trap, just trying to take care of her family,” Ryan said. “Most people don’t want to be dependent. And to label a whole group of Americans that way was wrong.... So I stopped thinking about it that way—and talking about it that way.”

And then in what I thought was a remarkable moment of public contrition, he said, “But I didn’t come out and say all this to be politically correct. I was just wrong.”

He added that there would no doubt in the future still be times when he would say things he wishes he had not, still times when he follows the wrong impulse. Me too.

Some will no doubt dismiss the speaker’s belated apology as too-little, too-late or mere cynical public relations, but who can say what his young audience made of it? The House interns had been gathered in the Ways and Means Committee hearing room, where, Ryan pointed out, some of the nation’s most enduring public policies have been hashed out by Republicans and Democrats—without recourse to 2nd amendment solutions—and where he first participated in the Washington political process as a young member of Congress.

Ryan called it the perfect setting for his speech. “It is here, in this committee, that we debate some of the biggest, most consequential issues,” he told these young people.

“And we always held ourselves to a higher standard of decorum. We treated each other with respect. We disagreed—often fiercely so—but we disagreed without being disagreeable.” He added, “It sounds like a scene unfamiliar to your generation.

“Looking around at what’s taking place in politics today, it is easy to get disheartened,” he told the interns. “Our political discourse...did not use to be this bad and it does not have to be this way,” he assured them.

Ryan remembered the late Congress member Jack Kemp as an inspiration to him as a young man, describing him as “a conservative willing—no, eager—to go to America’s bleakest communities and talk about how free enterprise could lift people out of poverty.”

Watching as Kemp found common cause with poverty fighters on the ground, young Paul Ryan felt instead of a sense of drift, a sense of purpose. “Jack inspired me to devote my professional life to public policy. It became a vocation,” Ryan told the interns

Politics, he said, “can be a battle of ideas, not insults. It can be about solutions. It can be about making a difference. It can be about always striving to do better.”

I find this moment in the speaker’s life, these words, a source of hope. He focused on solutions and policy making, not ideology; he spoke of politics as a vocation, not as an opportunity to ambition and exploit. How do we hold him to this the vision he set for himself? How has he sought to practically live this vocation he embraced? Does he require the occasionally fraternal correction from the people of God?

I see the Speaker as something of a Catholic work in progress, not unlike myself.

I often think of my career in Catholic journalism as perhaps the world’s most expensive evangelization program, so please don’t misunderstand my description of his encounter with the church and Catholic social teaching as scolding or belittling—as political snark. It is more like a recognizing. I see my own struggling, my own need to learn more in Ryan’s public grappling with the difficult demands of our faith. How hard is it to live it in our daily lives? Imagine trying to craft public policy in a society of such fierce competing claims and priorities?

Just a few years ago, the speaker was struggling to escape the impression that he was among those young adults stupefied by Ayn Rand. To many his various attempts to explain away his youthful enthusiasm for Rand was the source of amusement and derision. For me I’d have to take it is another sign of hope that he actually appears embarrassed now by his connection to Rand and her odious “philosophy.”

Ryan ultimately claimed that Aquinas not Ayn Rand was his political guiding light; good thing too as Rand considered the Catholic Church as powerful an enemy to capitalist exultation as global communism. I don’t want to oversell his conversion. In the policies he still pursues there is too much of Rand and too little of Paul. Ryan retains a suspicion of a social phenomenon that he deplores as collectivism but one most Catholics accept as a rational redistributionism that reflects the demands of mercy but also of justice. And while he deplores collectivism, Ryan does not seem to have grasped that that church for its part deplores the hyper individualism he seems to promote, which it sees as an error as destructive as collectivism. Human kind is essentially social; we speak of all being connected in the mystical body of Christ. That has practical implications as much as spiritual. The understanding of subsidiarity and how it is made a practical political reality has to reflect that.

Much has been made in recent days of the hacked email of poor John Podesta. In one exchange, speaking disparagingly of Rupert Murdoch, some of his correspondents mock how newly converted Catholic Republicans like Murdoch like to throw around

concepts like subsidiarity because, well, they may not know what they're talking about but neither does anyone else.

The unfortunate correspondents we have been forced to eavesdrop on may have been thinking also of Ryan, who at just about the same time the emails were composed was also discovering things to like in the Catholic social tradition. Much credit, in fact, for spiking the 2012 election season with a heady dose of Catholicism goes to VP candidate Ryan. His efforts to keep his Catholic cred after previous avowals of affection for the scowly Rand, drew a lot of attention from Catholic academics and social justice wonks. Repeated use of scary, esoteric Catholic-y sounding stuff like *subsidiarity*, *the common good* and *solidarity* in reviews of Ryan's budget proposals had befuddled secular journalists thumbing through the [Compendium of Catholic Social Teaching](#) and offered the nation a somewhat haphazard intro to the Catholic social tradition.

In 2011 Paul Ryan sent a letter to New York Cardinal Tim Dolan to make his case for his blueprint for America, the oft-repeated budget plan which blessedly has yet to be voted into effect. Once again it seems to me a public grappling with his faith. In his letter to Dolan, he is like a new kid who has just discovered an unobserved present behind the Christmas tree, he's rhetorically playing with this shiny discovery, subsidiarity.

Defending his budget priorities then, as he will no doubt be forced to do again this year, and for probably much the same reasons, Ryan reminds Dolan of this subsidiarity thingee, assuring the cardinal that his budget's "reform of Medicaid and other proposals is duly informed by the principle of subsidiarity."

He even quotes the Compendium for the cardinal, which (§. 186) instructs—his verb—that "it is an injustice and at the same time a grave evil and disturbance of right order to assign to a greater and higher association what lesser and subordinate organizations can do."

That is a fairly stripped down description of subsidiarity, the notion which emerged out of Catholic anthropology, that in each instance, as far as possible, and that is the potent phrase that Ryan and like-thinkers either overlook or suppress, higher levels of authority, like government, should always seek to perform a subsidiary, that is to say a supporting role to lower levels of social authority, such that ideally, ultimately, it is families themselves, headed no doubt by the wise Robert Youngs of the world, who resolve their own problems and respond to their own needs, unencumbered by a liberty thieving .government bureaucracy.

The speaker equates the idea of subsidiarity with the American political concept of "federalism," part of the reason he has so enthusiastically embraced this aspect of

Catholic social teaching. But this is sort of the fundamental error he is making, of course, subsidiarity and federalism, they're like homonyms of political philosophy, because subsidiarity is not only or not merely an idea out of or for civics, it emerges from a specific faith perspective and it is a concept that comes bundled with a whole lot of other obligations and expectations that cannot be parceled out of the Catholic notion of subsidiarity. There's those tricky demands of the common good and the preferential option for the poor, human dignity, for instance and the moral and spiritual embrace of solidarity to contend with.

Back then, it seemed like Ryan thought he could throw that all together into a Catholic word salad and that somehow his meaning and intentions would become clear.

In an interview with the Christian Broadcasting Network, he was asked to explain how his faith influenced his political philosophy and policy making.

This is an actual quote: "To me, the principle of subsidiarity, which is really federalism," Ryan said then, "meaning government closest to the people governs best, having a civil society of the principal of solidarity 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. By not having big government crowd out civic society, but by having enough space in our communities so that we can interact with each other, and take care of people who are down and out in our communities."

Okay, the notions are sort of jumbled together there and he's a little hard to follow, but he is not too far off, at least on the subsidiarity thingee and the hoped for goal of assisting those in our communities who are as he says, "down and out."

The problem is that in his understanding of subsidiarity, Ryan proposes a narrow to nonexistent role for government, especially in anti-poverty efforts. He reduces the preferential option for the poor, which he acknowledges as a "one of the primary tenets of Catholic social teaching," to meaning "don't keep people poor, don't make people dependent on government so that they stay stuck in their station in life." No, morally and practically the preferential option for the poor has to be much more than that.

Ryan maintains a binary understanding of government and culture that outflanks any positive role for government in responding to human need. There is little room for Catholic nuance or subtlety through that narrow filter. The outcome from such a perspective is wonderfully beneficial for people who seek a reduced role of government and perhaps not coincidentally the resulting reduction in tax burdens, at least regarding social spending. Practically speaking I don't think any of the Speaker's penny pinching

on social spending achieves much by way of budget and deficit reduction, since he offsets any saving with increased military spending and tax cuts for the already well-off.

When Ryan surfaces such notions, eradicating government intervention and tossing social burdens back to states, municipalities, private charities and families, the practical implausibility of a charity-based national social safety net is never acknowledged. Though many argue it is not spending enough to respond to persisting social deficits, the federal government still spends billions each year on various health and anti-poverty interventions. For instance despite a declining commitment to anti-poverty programs, the federal government still contributes around \$40 billion each year to rental assistance programs that reach about 5 million American families.

Assuming Ryan, in pushing his vision of subsidiarity, sincerely believes charitable agencies bankrolled by private giving can step in to provide assistance in the absence of government, can anyone imagine that the nation's charities could so realign their infrastructure and unify their efforts to replicate and replace even this one federal anti-poverty commitment? \$40 billion? Every year?

Certainly no one can say that every federal dollar spent on poverty reduction has proved well invested; and few Catholics support an over-defining or unwarranted role for government; No one desires that poverty in America become a generationally fixed reality because of state-induced dependency. these are the strawmen arguments the speaker haphazardly tosses up.

But are our options really as stark as no government or an obliterating, infantilizing dependency-generating government, a smothering bureaucracy, overwhelming community desires, family life, personal autonomy? I mean all that's okay when you need to get a gas pipeline through a Native American reservation or pump fracked natural gas through northern Westchester, but forget about it when it comes to health care. You don't want to do that to people.

When Ryan surveys contemporary poverty he sees government interventions that have not only not succeeded, they have created generational self-replications of poverty. In doing so he ignores any number of other variables that are, among many other forces, propelling modern poverty, among them, the continuing malperformance of underfunded public education systems in urban and rural communities, the excessive costs of higher education and limited options for vocational and skills retraining, the continuing shift to single parenthood—something often mistakenly assessed by conservatives as an outcome of the public aid system and not a driver to the same. Responding to those forces is complex, it's hard work and it will cost more money, way more than the piddling amounts divvied out to the poor now.

Ryan seems to ignore issues that might complicate his analysis. He simply leaves out the notion of positive subsidiarity, “the ethical imperative for communal, institutional or governmental action to create the social conditions necessary to the full development of the individual, such as the right to work, decent housing, health care”—and focuses on the concept’s preferential option for “smaller essential cells of society” (186).

Yes, the Catholic ideal of subsidiarity expresses a preference for the smallest possible social associations, but that preference does not exclude or prohibit a role for higher social players, like state and federal government, to intervene when it is appropriate for them to do so. In fact they are required to do so in a morally well-ordered society.

Ryan’s analysis takes as a given that the problem of persistent poverty in the United States is too much federal intervention, not too little, ignoring the fact that poverty levels were at their lowest at the end of the Great Society program and have been creeping up steadily since huge components of that project were abandoned under Nixon

On a positive note, the speaker has repeatedly now acknowledged that the federal government has a role to play in anti-poverty efforts.

I do believe there is a duty.... government has an important role to play here. But it shouldn’t be such a dominant role that it displaces civil society, that brings us closer to what Pope John Paul said in *Centesimus Annus*, what he called the “social-assistance state.”

There is the dread “the Social Assistance State,” which the compendium argues “[b]y intervening directly and depriving society of its responsibility . . . leads to a loss of human energies and an inordinate increase of public agencies, which are dominated more by bureaucratic ways of thinking than by concern for serving their clients, and which are accompanied by an enormous increase in spending” (*Compendium*, 187).

This seems like an indictment of any sort of government bureaucratic intervention in the presence of a market failure, assuming that neoliberal and laissez faire revivalists are willing to acknowledge that there may ever be such a thing as an incident of market failure, say regarding the delivery of health care, or perhaps affordable child care, tertiary education, social supports for new parents etc...

Of course when St. John Paul II was instructing on the perils of the social assistance state, he was writing to an audience that, while it included the United States, was not exclusively the United States. And he was writing from the experience and perspective of a Polish man who had barely escaped the kind attentions of an all-consuming, all-determining so-called social assistance state, one that had established a purported cradle

to the grave welfare bureaucracy that was ultimately more concerned with social surveillance and control than it was with social welfare.

I'm guessing that might have negatively colored his perception a little.

The speaker has interpreted Catholic skepticism of the social assistance state as a blanket prohibition. That just isn't so. The tradition speaks of lowest level competent authority, competent being key. The tradition includes a moral requirement of accompaniment, not abandonment. You can't issue a block grant to the state to do with as it wills and then wash your hand of your obligation to help the poor, and as we've heard the speaker does acknowledge on some level that the federal government has an obligation to support the poor and vulnerable. He has said some of the right things about his faith and some of the right things about the proper role of government. What does he offer us by way of policy proposals that reflect those good words?

Ryan used to call his budget the Path to Prosperity, they may have decided to change after too many economists pointed out that were it ever robustly administered the opposite was the more likely outcome.

It has been rechristened this year "The Better Way," and if Ryan gets a chance, pending the outcome of the November vote, we will all be hurtling down the better way in 2017.

The New Republic called the agenda expressed within Ryan's budget "as radical an overhaul of the federal government as anything that's come out of Trump's mouth."

The Better Way repeals most of Obamacare, from the individual and employer mandates to the Medicaid expansion to subsidies for consumers to purchase insurance. It would cut at least \$6 trillion in federal spending, with 62 percent of that coming from programs that help low- and moderate-income families.

Following up on his esteem for subsidiarity, the better way budget would "block-grant" a number of anti-poverty programs, meaning that instead of direct payments to individuals from the federal government, states would receive fixed sums annually to manage without any federal restrictions (and without the ability for expanded funding based on changing need). We have already had too many examples of mangled outcomes from that approach to social spending.

Ryan's plan raises Medicare eligibility to 67 and cripple the program by offering "premium support," see they did not call them vouchers, for seniors to buy private insurance. According to the New Republic, that would mean "fracturing the market and breaking a system that works pretty well." Ryan's plan would cut individual and

corporate tax rates, but 99.6 percent of the benefits would accrue to the wealthiest 1 percent.

According to the Center for Budget and Policy Priorities, together, the House GOP's budget plan proposed in March and its "Better Way" tax reform package released in June would "significantly raise the incomes of millionaires while sharply cutting programs for low-, moderate-, and middle-income families and individuals.

According to the center, "the package would make most Americans significantly worse off and exacerbate income inequality, despite the exceptionally wide divergence between incomes at the top and for the rest of the population that has developed in recent decades."

That's because the House GOP plan schedules \$3.1 trillion in tax cuts over the next ten years, dramatically tilted towards the top. By 2025, nearly all of the tax cuts would go to households with incomes over \$1 million; low- and middle-income households would gain only slightly. Over the next decade, millionaires would receive an estimated \$2.6 trillion in tax cuts.

That sounds like robbing from the poor to pay the rich. Where have I heard that before? Somewhere, New Testament, Thomas Aquinas, no, I remember now. Good old Atlas Shrugged.

In Rand's novel, the mysterious Ragnar Danneskjöld declares, "I'm after a man whom I want to destroy. He died many centuries ago, but until the last trace of him is wiped out of men's minds, we will not have a decent world to live in. . . ." no, it's not Jesus, he talking about, that was my first thought too. It's Robin Hood that Danneskjöld pursues, that foolish collectivist Robin Hood "held to be the first man who assumed a halo of virtue by practicing charity with wealth which he did not own, by giving away goods which he had not produced, by making others pay for the luxury of his pity. He is the man who became the symbol of the idea that need, not achievement, is the source of rights, that we don't have to produce, only to want, that the earned does not belong to us, but the unearned does."

Robin Hood "was the man who robbed the rich and gave to the poor," Randy Ragnar complains. "Well, I'm the man who robs the poor and gives to the rich—or, to be exact, the man who robs the thieving poor and gives back to the productive rich."

The thieving poor...the makers and the takers, the 47 percent...

Now tag on the idea that in executing this inverse Robin Hood that you would be helping the poor by teaching freeing them from soul-crushing dependency, liberating

resources to those who could best invest it and put it to use, you would be contributing to economic growth and an accelerated economy that would eventually produce enough benefits, enough surplus wealth that some of it was bound to trickle down to the poor and so lift up their leaky boats of need and you've constructed a pretty good approximation of a Catholic rationalizing his problematic radical individual tendencies.

Pope Francis has surely encountered thinking like this before, heard such lectures, understood that poverty, not dependency is the most soul-crushing villain to confront, perhaps Speaker Ryan did not hear this magisterial expression.

“Some people continue to defend trickle-down theories which assume that economic growth, encouraged by a free market, will inevitably succeed in bringing about greater justice and inclusiveness in the world,” Pope Francis wrote in his Apostolic Exhortation “*Evangelii Gaudium*” (54). “This opinion, which has never been confirmed by the facts, expresses a crude and naïve trust in the goodness of those wielding economic power and in the sacralized workings of the prevailing economic system. Meanwhile, the excluded are still waiting.” Or as Francis put it another time: “The promise was that when the glass was full, it would overflow, benefitting the poor. But what happens instead, is that when the glass is full, it magically gets bigger, nothing ever comes out for the poor.”

These sound like facile scolds; in fact what pope Francis describes is a real-world phenomenon, confirmed by economists at the International Monetary Fund. The rich tend to hoard surplus wealth or spend it in a manner that does not generate economic ripple effects.

In fact the IMF reported in June that when the top earners in society make more money, it actually slows down economic growth. On the other hand, when poorer people earn more, society as a whole benefits. They have needs, have to buy real manufactured goods, not frivolous luxuries, they spend money quickly and stimulate flagging economies.

It turns out, despite Rand's delusions about the social harm of self-giving, one I have to say Ryan seems to have partly and perhaps permanently absorbed in his notion that doing the least for the poor is the best way to help them, there is a practical case to be made for altruism. High levels of income inequality drag down growth because poor people then are forced to struggle to pay for health care and education, and that ultimately hurts society as a whole. Social under-investments in education mean poor children end up in lower-quality schools. They don't go on to college, reducing worker productivity and retarding wealth creation.

“What government is supposed to do,” he said, “is create an environment where the individual can thrive and communities can bloom. In other words, government makes things possible, but the people make them happen.”

I don't disagree with this; probably many of the people he presumes are ideological adversaries don't disagree with it. Who wants to create interventionist government bureaucracies when a local ideas and a local approach might work best? Who wants to see tax dollars spend fruitlessly? But some problems are too big for families to address, some are too big for small communities, some exceed the grasp or could fall victim to the prejudices of a state. I can arrange a septic system for my yard, but even if I teamed up with my neighbors I couldn't get a decent waste-water retrieval network built. I'd expect a government agency to come in and lend a hand on that. Lowest competent authority is what subsidiarity demands; competent being the key word there.

Only by perceiving persistent poverty as an individual failure, or a family's failure or a local community's failure and not something that is the result of vast powerful forces far beyond the control or influence of an individual, say deindustrialization or globalization, could you presume that government should not have, and would be morally excused from a role in responding to poverty. But that's is how the problem of poverty is too often perceived. The speaker says he no longer views it that way and that is cause for encouragement, but his prescriptions remained mired in pre-Catholic days.

So Paul may be circling his first love longingly, he may be saying the right things about an obligation to America's poor, but I'd have to say that judging by his acts, the policies he proposes, his budgetary ambitions and a near obsession with dismantling progress toward universal coverage made by Obamacare, his political heart still belongs to Aynny.

Still I don't want to be smug about. As I've noted the speaker inhabits a much more complicated realm than I. The founder of the Society of Jesus put effective love (love shown in deeds) above affective love (love based on nice feelings). Results not intentions matter and that applies not just to Paul Ryan. If he concocted a block grant program which would devolve authority for public welfare to states that seemed plausible and had baked-in protections that seemed dependable and just, would I be willing to give it a try or would I categorically ignore such proposals if they came across Ryan's side of the aisle?

I would like to give him the benefit of doubt, I would like to live my commitment to the presupposition I spoke of earlier. But all in all, Paul Ryan isn't helping me enough yet, the policies he devises and promotes are not showing me much more than the same formulas freshened up with some Catholic-y sounding terms, formulas we already know don't work.

It's enough to make a fella reach fall back into comfortable, familiar partisan territory .

But when they go low, we go high, Michelle Obama said recently. I am enough of a stubborn narrow back that I don't mind going low sometimes, myself. But then I have to remember that atavistic Irish American is only one of the identities I try on each week. That other niddling identity, that one as a Christian, reminds me that I am called not to accept the status quo and participate in the coarse patterns of American political life, it reminds me that I am actually called to bring something new into this world, a kingdom of peace and mercy and real brotherhood. That surely includes at least hearing each other out respectfully.

It's terrible to have to remember that obligation and its daily practical implications. I have to remind myself that all the time, and perhaps, recognizing another fellow grappling with the obligations of it, I will begin to remind Paul Ryan about it as well.