Economic issues for the 2020 election campaign

By Amata Miller, IHM

At this stage, we don’t know what issues will be central in the 2020 campaign, but we can identify the issues that our faith and values indicate ought to be the focus of our pre-election conversations and our action as voters.

Pope Francis reminds us by word and example that we are called to “go to the margins,” to give priority to the needs of the marginalized, those whose human dignity is being violated by the social structures and systems of our times. Our reflections on the Gospel and Catholic social teaching are clear about where our priorities should be.

As we consider the future leadership of our country, that means heightening our concern for justice for all those who are being left behind by the social, economic and political systems today. Those being called “forgotten Americans” include the materially poor, people of color, Native Americans, immigrants, those whose work went abroad or was automated, those unprotected by law or unions, those who are undereducated or unsuitably skilled for available work, those in opportunity-poor rural areas and unable to move, those affected by adverse effects of climate change and all those who experience marginalization in the United States today. They are being recognized as the “forgotten Americans.” And we now realize that our nation’s policies have neglected and been responsible for much of the poverty and suffering in the rest of the world, though we have become rich and been a superpower with ability and resources for justice and peace. We are at a moment of critical change and opportunity.

Today, we are a second Gilded Age of vast inequality and divisive polarization, both nationally and globally. In our country, the wealth of the richest has increased exponentially while incomes of the middle class and the poorest have stagnated. And 43% of our nation’s children live in food-insecure families, lacking enough income to provide three meals a day. This kind of inequality is evident in inadequacies in education, child care, housing, health care and access to employment with sufficient wages. It has many faces, and especially since 2016, it has begotten uprisings of various groups and the polarities among us. The fruits of economic growth have gone disproportionately to the richest and as a nation, we have neglected those whose lives have been negatively affected
by that growth. We are now being called to pay attention to those forgotten Americans and to our global responsibilities.

Economic and political issues are inexorably intertwined, because democratic political action is intended to remedy the effects of economic inequality and polarization, by giving voice to everyone in shaping the laws and policies of the nation. But political elites whose attention is focused on raising funds for the next election have neglected their human responsibilities. Both our democracy and national and global economic health are at stake in this election.

In her 2018 book, titled “The Forgotten Americans,” economist Isabel Sawhill, who has served in federal administration and as advisor on public policy issues, effectively makes a non-partisan case for focus on policies to enhance job security as a means to healing polarities and facilitating economic justice. She makes the case that jobs that pay adequate incomes for work are foundational for worker dignity and self-respect and thus to healing the divisiveness of a society in which the “working class” feels disregarded by political and intellectual “elites.” She points out that in our meritocratic society there is a non-partisan belief that people who work full-time should be able to attain the American Dream and so focus on job security issues makes good economic and political sense right now.

Sawhill argues that increasing job security for the “forgotten Americans” would include several kinds of economic policy. She argues for a “hand-up” rather than a “hand-out” approach to address the needs of the neglected. Economic growth is not enough; we need redistribution of the fruits of prosperity through policies that:

- Reskill the workforce through access to improved education to develop skills needed for new kinds of work, investing in employer-provided retraining opportunities through tax credits for retraining low-wage earners for better-paid jobs;
- Create jobs and rewarding work, maintain full employment through job program linked to the safety net as needed and increase worker tax credits for earned income as well as the minimum wage, paid for through more progressive taxes;
- Increase the role for private sector in improving worker security by supporting sharing of profits and worker ownership through tax credits to employers offering these benefits;
• Create new social insurance programs financed through payroll taxes that all pay to support life-long learning, parental leave and time off to help struggling workers.

Talking up these proposals could generate new thinking and seed action for real, long-term solutions to the economic and political problems that face us, real ways to “move to the margins” as Pope Francis calls us.

In addition, there are some specific economic issues that should be addressed with a focus on those who have been marginalized:

• Access to affordable health care for all.
• Reforms to make sustainable the current social insurance programs – Social Security and Medicare.
• Development of more affordable housing, especially in cities where housing costs are extraordinarily high.
• Continuance of effective foreign aid in those programs that have reduced malaria, maternal deaths and epidemics of cholera, HIV, polio and Ebola as well as global poverty and violence.
• Increases in the minimum wage at the federal and state levels.
• Federal and state support of programs to avert the many approaches of climate change especially in the most vulnerable places.
• Addressing the drastic infrastructure improvements threatening the lives of many, structuring the programs to create new and better-paid jobs.
• Reform trade policies and agreements in ways that foster global justice and peace – through collaboration instead of conflict.
• Make tax structures more progressive on all levels through new forms of taxation that will generate new revenues to control of deficit-financing borrowing that simply passes the costs on to future generations.

A huge but necessary economic menu for the 2020 campaign. Amen!