

# Keeping

**I**N line with its subtitle—*A Centrist Blueprint for America’s Faith-Based Future*—a recurring device in Political Science Professor John J. DiIulio Jr. C’80 G’80’s new book, *Godly Republic*, is the refutation of extreme left- and right-wing “myths” about the role of religion in American government with a middle-ground “TRUTH.”

Basically, though, the book’s argument flows from the first of these verities: “The framers of the U.S. Constitution founded a new government that they hoped would guide America’s rise, not as either a secular state or a Christian nation, but as a godly republic marked by religious pluralism.”

From this, DiIulio reasons, there is nothing in law preventing the federal government from providing funding to religious-affiliated, or “faith-based,” groups for the same services—daycare, drug counseling, welfare-to-work assistance, and so on—for which secular groups are eligible for support. And, since such groups are actually performing those services in many of the nation’s most blighted areas, assisting them in their efforts is likely to be an effective way to deliver federal dollars aimed at serving the poor.

This “level playing field” view, according to DiIulio, is shared by the great majority of the American people, and even by their elected representatives in moments when they are not swayed to profess otherwise for partisan reasons. (Sadly, those moments have been few since 2000.)

Currently the Frederic Fox Leadership Professor of Politics, Religion, and Civil Society, DiIulio was raised Catholic, working-class, and Democratic in South

and Southwest Philadelphia before Penn, a Harvard Ph.D., and a tenured professorship at Princeton [“John DiIulio Gets Religion,” October 1997]. Despite this charmed professional progress, DiIulio came close to chucking the academy back in the 1990s to become an advocate for faith-based programs and work directly with religious groups, particularly

## Interview

urban, Black and Latino churches. (He was dissuaded by Princeton’s then-dean of the faculty, one Dr. Amy Gutmann.)

In 1999 DiIulio joined Penn’s faculty. He became known to the general public a year later as President George W. Bush’s “faith czar”—and for calling certain White House operatives “Mayberry Machiavellis” after resigning his post as the first head of the White House Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives. He had always planned to leave after six months—he stayed eight—but he freely admits to a deep sense of frustration at how a bipartisan effort to help “the least, the last, the lost, the poorest among us in places like our own city of Philadelphia” was transformed into a major battleground in the culture wars.

While President Bush for the most part escapes DiIulio’s ire, the author has plenty of blunt criticism for other Republicans and Democrats who played politics with the faith-based issue, pandering to their extreme conservative-evangelical and secular-liberal bases, respectively, and for the journalists who aided and abetted that effort. He also points the finger at other entrenched interests—particularly the large organizations, religious and secular, non-profit and for-profit—that currently enjoy the

lion’s share of federal largesse and are inclined to keep it that way.

Despite the powerful forces arrayed against the “faith-based” idea, DiIulio hasn’t given up on it. In *Godly Republic*—equal parts historical analysis, political survivor’s tale, research brief, and sermon—he lays out his case for its historical legitimacy and present and future importance in cogent prose that rises at moments to eloquence. Though written with his students in mind, he says, the book also sends a powerful message to a future administration in a perhaps less polarized, more receptive era. (Regardless of whether the administration receiving that message is Democratic or Republican, it will probably have to do without the messenger, though.)

An excerpt from *Godly Republic* begins on page 42. DiIulio also spoke with *Gazette* editor John Prendergast about the book. Here is an edited version of that conversation.

**While there seems to be no end to the arguments about what the framers of the Constitution thought about the role of religion in public life, you argue that they were actually pretty clear in their intentions.**

If the Founding Fathers had wanted to [form] a Christian nation, they’d have done it. They purposely did not want to do it. In fact, they could not possibly have been more explicit about not wanting to do it.

You don’t put a provision in the body of the Constitution saying office-holding is open to all persons without regard to a religion; you don’t write about a zeal for different religions and about religious opinions being the primary cause of factions; you don’t write about the need

# Faith

Bloodied but unbowed by his stint as George W. Bush's first "faith czar," alumnus and political science professor John. J. Dilulio is more convinced than ever of America's faith-based future—and he has a new book that tells why.



for a multiplicity of sects, i.e. religious pluralism, if you're aiming for a Christian nation.

The anti-federalists, those who opposed the Constitution, many of them were much more of the mind that government office and public positions in the new national government in this republic should be open mainly, if not exclusively, to people of particular Anglo-Protestant beliefs. They lost, fortunately.

Now we know [the United States] is not a Christian nation, but by the early- to mid-20th century we have people going around saying, "Well, no, it's meant to be a strictly secular state." That ain't true, either. And what I think has happened over the last 50 years plus is that the Supreme Court, under both liberal and conservative justices, has recovered the original-intentions jurisprudence, which is neither Christian nation nor secular state but really neutrality, so that whether you're a Methodist, Muslim, Mormon,

Quaker, Catholic, Jew, atheist, Wiccan, Scientologist—I'd even say whether you're a sociologist—you're entitled to all the rights of citizenship. Government can neither prefer nor prohibit any particular religious worldview, belief, tenet, and so on. And the end game for government is to be neutral in handling religion.

**In basic terms, when you talk about federal funding for faith-based organizations, what does that mean?**

You can't proselytize with any public funds. You can't use them to engage in any sectarian instruction at all, and you can't use them for any type of worship services at all. You can *be* pervasively sectarian—your organization can be an organization with a religiously anchored mission statement, you can have people who are faith-motivated—but there is no government program or policy that says, "teach the Bible," or "convert people to a particular faith."

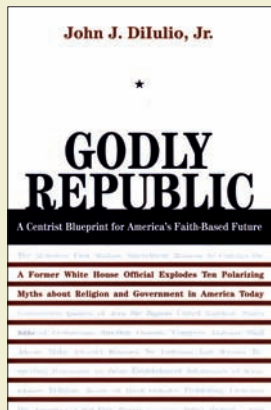
What we're talking about then is religious nonprofits being able to participate in the government grant-making process on exactly the same basis as all other nonprofits, religious or secular, large or small, local or national. Now the secret, or the fact that was hiding in plain view in 2001 [when the White House Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives was formed], was that we've been doing this for like a hundred years with Catholic charities and Jewish federations and Lutheran social services and so forth. What we had failed to do, however, was to apply the same standards to smaller, grassroots, community-based nonprofits, which has had the effect of discriminating against mainly African American and Latino persons of faith.

These organizations have been doing a social service delivery function for years, and yet doing it without government support. Not just the bag of clothes and the soup kitchen—health screening, a third of

# How To Do Good

BY JOHN J. DIULIO JR. | **I believe that the desire to serve the common good is universal and, save under totalitarian rule or the like (and sometimes even then), almost irrepressible.** But the common good as a strong human impulse only comes to practical fruition in societies where it is also woven into prevailing political theory and reflected by living constitutional norms.

In order to get people to cooperate with this civic ideal and selflessly serve citizens in need, it helps to have an overarching and widely shared conception of why such good works are good and may even sometimes be morally required. It helps to establish who will be considered responsible for providing help to whom, when, and how. It helps to define the conditions, if any, under which wider groups of citizens, including those who have no desire to help, may be required to do so—for example, by paying taxes to support public human-services programs to which they strongly object. Finally, it helps to define the parameters within which the federal government—the national political community in the person of its democratically elected national government representatives—can and should act, and exercise all necessary and proper authority, to help people in need.



## EXCERPT

In other words, it helps to have a working conception of the common good that relates individual rights to social duties. It helps to have some generally accepted concept concerning the conditions under which individuals, social institutions, and governments are expected to work alone or work together to provide help to people in need.

The godly republic's first leaders talked about the common good a great deal but never quite got around to fleshing out the concept in this way. James Madison and other framers of the Constitution frequently used the term. The concept also crops up in their writings even when they do not explicitly use it; for example, Madison in the Federalist Paper No. 10 defined "factions" in opposition to "the permanent and aggregate interests of the community."

If "the permanent and aggregate interests of the community" sounds a bit religious, it is.

Conceptually, the idea of the common good has deep religious roots in the Judeo-Christian tradition and in the Natural Rights-Natural Law doctrine ("endowed by Nature," "inalienable rights," etc.) that was inscribed by Thomas Jefferson into the Declaration of Independence. It is also present but implicit in the Preamble to the Constitution's organic conception of "We the People" as encompassing "ourselves and our Posterity."

all daycare, 40 percent of all organizations that do welfare work. They are leveraging 10, 20 times their weight in social services delivery. So my contention was, is, and remains that there is a civic stake that these sacred places should be permitted to serve civic purposes on exactly the same basis—same administrative protocol, same performance standard, same oversight. The playing field needs to be level, not tilted.

**You open the book with some statements that the reader is meant to think are by George Bush but are actually quotes from Hillary Clinton. That's one of several ways you demonstrate that there has been a general political consensus on this issue, at least philosophically. Why did it generate such controversy?**

Unfortunately, what I call the orthodox sectarians and the orthodox seculars really had a field day turning what was and should have been and could have

been a bipartisan effort to think of creative and innovative and constitutional ways to help the poor into a culture-war debate. That was really, to me—having studied American government and having taught American government and politics for 20 years—really, really disappointing and deeply disillusioning.

**You don't seem to think that the media helped much.**

You can almost understand the elected officials and the 20,000 people running around Capitol Hill with not much else to do, which is what we have, and the 4,000 political appointees who all need to show and earn their stripes—there's almost a pardonable polarization. But why in the world would people who are supposed to be the watchdogs and the defenders and the explainers of our democracy, why would they want to play into that hyperbole or not sift for the facts?

**In addition to the people on both sides misusing the available information, you also make two related points. One is that it is hard to study the impact of these grassroots groups for a variety of reasons. But you also note that most of the organizations that are getting money, secular or sectarian, have not had much study of their effectiveness, either.**

I used to ask people to engage in a thought experiment. What would happen tomorrow if you awakened in Philadelphia, and all the community-serving grassroots religious groups were gone? How would you know it? Well you'd know it because a third of your daycares would be gone, a lot of your preschools would be gone, you'd know it because all the folks who were in transitional welfare to work—40 percent of them, roughly—would not have anywhere to go.

Well, then [this thought experiment actually] happened in New Orleans. The whole town is wiped out, 80 percent is

Madison and many of the other founding fathers were essentially conventional Christian believers in the Protestant or Reformed tradition. With the exception of the only clergyman to sign both the Declaration and the Constitution, Madison's Princeton tutor Reverend John Witherspoon, Madison and the other great minds of the early republic pretty much, as it were, took their Protestant theology off the rack. They brilliantly borrowed much of their political theory (separation of powers, checks and balances, and limited government itself) from ideas once current in Tudor England, and they smartly lifted much of their underlying moral theory about individual rights and social duties directly from Anglo-Protestant tracts like the *Westminster Confessions* and quasi-Christian Enlightenment treatises on the social contract (most famously the writings of John Locke).

The godly republic's faithful Anglo-Protestant founders therefore largely ignored (and often compounded) the profound philosophical disconnect between their conceptions of the common good and limited government in relation to *individual rights*, on the one side, and *social duties*, on the other side.

That philosophical disconnect has intellectually limited Anglo-Protestant moral, social, and political theory for centuries. It is arguably related to the theological self-contradictions and hypocritical social practices attacked by many American writers both before and after the Civil War, most notably by the ex-slave Frederick Douglass after Irish Catholic immigrants taught him how to read. What evangelical Christian writer Mark Noll has lamented as the modern-day "scandal of the Evangelical mind" has its roots in this profound philosophical failure.

As I joked to Vice President Al Gore in May 1999 during a public meeting in Nashville, Tennessee, citing the Catechism of the Catholic Church: "Don't leave home, or Rome, without it!" He laughed, and joined the audience in laughing even harder

when I pulled the tome out from behind my chair and "Catechism-thumped" it. I had done much the same act in the preceding years at conservative Protestant gatherings. For instance, at a Pepperdine University forum, in answer to a question about how Protestant groups might do more social service work in poor communities, I joked, "Well, would you like to become Catholic?"

But I was only half-joking. When it comes to defining the common good in a theologically anchored and intellectually coherent yet practical fashion, there is, I believe, no one source better or truer than my beloved Catechism, especially the parts that deal with "human community."

As I argued in 1998 before the Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences at the Vatican, modern Catholics have a time-tested way, made consistent in the 20th century with representative democratic ideals, of thinking about individual rights in relation to social duties. Essentially, to "think Catholic" here means to understand core Catholic theological precepts as they relate to traditional Catholic social teachings—universal social teachings that can be embraced even by citizens who totally reject some or all of the Catholic theological precepts from which they are derived. Thomas Jefferson personally edited the Protestant Bible's Gospels into a booklet entitled *The Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth*. For civic purposes, he wanted to introduce Protestant social teachings to Native Americans. By analogy, let me now briefly sketch certain civic-minded social teachings that happen to have a Catholic pedigree but that citizens of all faiths or of no faith can follow or not without regard to religion.

Theologically, Catholics believe in the God of Abraham and in the divinity of Jesus Christ. Catholic theology animates a social teaching about family, community, and government that can be accepted or rejected without accepting Catholicism or any other particular religious belief system: *subsidiarity*.

flooded. Who led among the first responders—in addition to U.S. Coast Guard, which was really one of the few government agencies that threw away the book and did good stuff? Answer: the religious groups. Who is taking the lead in the physical, financial, and human recovery process? Answer: the 900 of the 1,500 congregations that have come back—Catholic charities, the Salvation Army, the Lutheran social services, the Jewish federations. Those are the groups that have really led, and nobody even disputes that.

How many of the literally tens and tens of thousands of government contracts and grants have ever been subjected to an independent performance audit? The answer is well under one tenth of one percent. Where there have been a few, especially in the immediate aftermath of the Government Performance and Results Act of 1993, the findings were either ambiguous or negative, not only with respect to the

results of the program—did the people get jobs, did the housing get built—but with respect to mere compliance with the government’s actual performance protocols and administrative protocols.

Now, all of a sudden when a community-serving religious organization in North Philly shows up and says: “Excuse me, we’ve been doing after-school programs for like 25 years, and we’ve got about 300 kids who come, and we’ve got a reading program and we have a teacher who used to work for the public schools, and we’re not using the Bible, because it’s not graded reading material, and we just want to meet in our church basement, and we’ve got a lot more people coming in now so we got a lot more child-only welfare cases. Gosh, the radiator is broken and busted, do you think we could get a \$25,000 grant from the local youth and family services agency, which got it from the state, which got it from the federal government?”

NO. Why? “Well, you’re religious and we would need to independently assess ...”

I heard that same story in the Bronx, in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, in Boston, in Philly, everywhere I went in the ’90s. I wish I had taken a tape recorder. Now my response to that has been, OK, good. Even though we are having a radically selective attention to this problem, let’s have it. Let’s subject them to that scrutiny. And as we do that, do you think we might want to go back to the people who are getting multi-million dollar—and multi-billion in some cases—multi-year grants?

When we did an audit in 2001, the top 10 grant-getters were the same organizations in each domain of social service, every year for the previous five years, not one of which had been subjected to an independent, systematic performance audit.

**We’re approaching another presidential election. What’s your view of the prospects for the faith-based idea gaining**

The Catechism defines the family as “the original cell of social life,” the “community in which we first “learn to care and take responsibility for the young, the old, the sick, the handicapped, and the poor.” Following the subsidiarity principle, we must “take care not to usurp the family’s prerogatives or interfere in its life.” Following the exact same principle, however, when families cannot fulfill their responsibilities, “larger communities” have “the duty of helping them.”

But which larger communities are to help distressed families, how, and under what conditions? “Excessive intervention by the state,” the Catechism cautions, “can threaten personal freedom and initiative ... The principle of subsidiarity ... sets limits for state intervention.” That, however, is only half of the principle.

The other half is that larger communities, up to and including national political communities of citizens acting through their democratic governments, must support the family “in case of need and help coordinate its activity with the activities of the rest of society, always with a view to the common good.”

Fidelity to the common good requires that each of us work to bring about a condition of social well-being in which we “make accessible to each what is needed to lead a truly human life: food, clothing, health ... and so on.” As Vice President Dan Quayle argued, and as his successor, Vice President Gore, heartily agreed, when families are happy and healthy, communities thrive. Or, as I have heard many conservatives quip (the celebrated American Enterprise Institute scholar, and my fellow Catholic, Michael Novak, was the first): “The family is our best department of health, education, and welfare.”

Granted. But how should a subsidiarity-minded citizen respond to the plight of the roughly two million children in America whose fathers or mothers are imprisoned, whose families are often broken and impoverished, and whose own

life prospects, as all the research shows, are thereby badly diminished? How should he or she respond to the plight of millions of children and families in poor neighborhoods from north central Philadelphia to south central Los Angeles? How should we all manifest effective civic compassion for the innocent inner-city toddlers and teenagers who this very night could lift their eyes to heaven and with complete justification cry, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

Subsidiarity says that in all such cases one should respond by giving at least some time and money to family-supporting organizations—national and local, public and private, religious and secular, in the suites and on the streets. I am talking about national secular nonprofit organizations like Big Brothers Big Sisters of America and Amachi; national religious nonprofit organizations like Prison Fellowship Ministries (Angel Tree, InnerChange Freedom Initiative, and other programs); charity dollars for grassroots volunteers who know the low-income inner-city children whom they serve; tax dollars for government employees who, without knowing these same children, serve them by faithfully implementing federal-state programs like Medicaid or the State Children’s Health Insurance Program (SCHIP); and many more.

Metaphorically speaking, subsidiarity teaches that the first call for help should always be a local call, starting with a house call. Charity begins at home, and so does compassion. We should do our utmost to honor our social obligations through families, voluntary associations, churches, and charities. We should prefer social cooperation to social engineering, the veneration of subsidiarity norms to the proliferation of bureaucratic rules, and the cultivation of civic virtue to the exercise of public authority.

However, as happened massively during the Great Depression, private initiatives and civil institutions are sometimes unable to help the needy and neglected in our midst. We should then call

**some headway, and is there a different likelihood if it's a Republican administration versus a Democratic administration?**

I think there is a different likelihood, and in this case the Democrats are more likely than the Republicans to sustain the office and the initiative—probably under a different name, but I hope with the exact mandate and set of responsibilities. Because the Democrats in this field, especially the leading ones, are at the margins at least more open to these kinds of public-private partnerships. They're more faith-friendly.

The Republicans this time around are strangely less likely to have it high on their lists. And that may change.

**Would you ever consider, in a Republican or Democratic administration, stepping back into the role of directing an office on faith-based initiatives?**

That question came up [with one of the candidates I've advised] and my

answer was, "Sure, unless the option to be drawn and quartered is available." I don't think I ever want to be in the limelight or crossfire again, not because I was beaten up and traumatized by it, though I was, but because I know my comparative advantage.

I was a pretty good advocate for faith-based—we got it into the vernacular, we got it onto the public agenda. Independent of all the pulling and hauling and fireworks and dramatics and so forth in 2001 and the somewhat disappointing record at the national level, 33 state governments now have offices of faith and community initiatives, 12 of which have switched parties and still maintained the office. Over a hundred mayors' offices have them. So it's trickled down in a significant way.

Even more important than that reality is the change in the minds of people who are religious leaders, civic leaders in urban America in many of our poor-

est neighborhoods, who realize that they have an active claim on government if they choose to exercise it. No one has the right to kick them to the curb, and it's not just for the big religious leaders or people of a particular religious denomination. That they have every bit as much a right, if they so choose, consistent with their faith tradition, to step up and ask for support and government help to do the good civic works that they're doing in their neighborhoods. That has been my greatest joy.

Nothing begins without individuals, nothing lasts without institutions, right? So it needs to be institutionalized. I think that the long-term health of the least well-off people in urban America depends on the so-called faith-based social movement gaining even greater legitimacy and respectability and allies and friends than it already has. And I think it already has a lot of them. That's my story. ♦

on ourselves as members of a larger community. As necessary, we must enlist to the cause of effective social compassion our representative political institutions and the federal, state, and local government bureaucracies that translate legislative decisions into administrative actions on behalf of people in need.

Political communities, like all human communities, are morally required to serve the common good. Local government is always preferred to state government, and state government is always preferred to national government, but these preferences are to be tempered by due consideration of which levels of government are necessary to serve the common good. As many Catholics who marched into the Democratic Party during the New Deal believed, the national government can be a legitimate and effective means of promoting a humane social order within which ordinary men, women, and children can lead peaceful and productive, if not uniformly prosperous, lives.

While we are not to be allergic to national government, we must be ever wary about becoming addicted to national government, and ever mindful that government action can enervate families and smaller communities. This weakening effect can occur regardless of whether the public laws are mal-intentioned or well-intentioned. For example, through mal-intentioned Jim Crow laws, state and local governments weakened the black family and stifled its socioeconomic progress. After new federal civil rights laws were enacted, Washington's well-intentioned welfare laws undermined another generation of poor black families from coast to coast. We must be vigilant about pruning government policies that enervate civil institutions and planting ones that make it easier for government at all levels to bolster these institutions, including grassroots, family-supporting, community-serving, religious ministries.

But theoretical guidelines are the easy part. We need to apply

our subsidiarity principle to an America that is today a demographically diverse society of over 300 million souls, living in 50 states and tens of thousands of local jurisdictions. It is a sprawling society with millions of people in need and numerous pockets of concentrated poverty.

**In 1996**, when President Clinton declared that the era of so-called big government was over, he was right—but only because, in the godly republic, that era never actually began.

Instead, after the Second World War, as Washington's taxing and spending exploded, America developed a government-by-proxy system: What government does to help our society's distressed families, our deserving poor, our disabled, our infirm elderly, our abused and neglected children, it does through all manner of intergovernmental, public-private, and religious-secular partnerships. This uniquely American hybrid of public administration and public finance puzzles our civic cousins in European democracies and miffs or mystifies Americans themselves; but for all its many flaws and foibles, it is in theory at least fully compatible with subsidiarity doctrine. And, sometimes at least, the system even works effectively.

For instance, wearing subsidiarity doctrine on my sleeve and sitting in Philadelphia, I was heartened when not just local charities and local government but also federal disaster-relief agencies responded to the plight of fellow citizens in Oklahoma City who in April 1995 suffered a terrible bombing. I was likewise pleased when, in the mid-1990s, a Republican-led Congress and a Democratic White House enacted a new federal law that extended federal-state Medicaid coverage to all needy persons aged 19 or younger, including low-income kids who live in Philadelphia, Mississippi. And, in the late 1990s, I was gratified when partnerships between inner-city

preachers and local law-enforcement officials, in conjunction with intergovernmental social-welfare and public-health programs, helped to reduce youth violence in many cities.

But to preach subsidiarity without practicing it is to forsake the common good. For literally millions of Americans, subsidiarity doctrine is a false gospel, social compassion is a polite fiction, and social policy is a cruel hoax. A toddler living in a blighted inner-city neighborhood; a middle-school student who has never had adequate food, money, or medicine; an illiterate teenaged high-school dropout who has not been protected from street violence or sexual predators or consistently cared for by at least one socially responsible adult; a nonviolent young adult who sold a small amount of illegal drugs and will be behind bars until middle age—these Americans and millions like them have been failed by our society. They have been failed by family members, neighbors, religious believers, fellow citizens, and government officials.

## For literally millions of Americans, subsidiarity doctrine is a false gospel, social compassion is a polite fiction, and social policy is a cruel hoax.

Americans have repeatedly been warned that inner-city social ills will spread, “spill over,” or otherwise cost us all dearly. Even when made with a straight face, a sincere heart, and a post-1968 copyright, such claims create only minor civic stirs and are, in any case, empirically unconvincing.

America is an extremely prosperous country and an international economic colossus with an expanding college-educated middle class. This is so, even though Americans and their political leaders in both parties have spent the last half-century perfecting a devilishly self-serving “urban” policy: mass suburbanization and mass incarceration.

As a result, low-income people with extreme risks of suffering from multiple social ills have become ever more highly concentrated in inner-city neighborhoods. Their plight is a social, moral, and civic disgrace, but most Americans are not, in fact, adversely affected by it in any way that truly moves them—other than moving them to the suburbs.

As the nation’s top social scientists have documented and documented, socioeconomic inequalities in America, especially ones linked strongly to formal educational attainments, have grown since the 1970s. The 2005 Hurricane Katrina disaster reminded us that America is home to many citizens who live in extreme poverty, in places like the lower ninth ward of New Orleans. Before long, this problem disappeared from daily news headlines.

The failure to fix, or even to consistently and compassionately focus on, what in 1962 the Catholic-educated democratic socialist Michael Harrington termed “the other America” has left a moral stain. But alas, it has not been either an economic drain or a social strain sufficient to get most Americans to act as if they really cared about achieving the common good in our “one nation, under God, with liberty and justice for all.”

Thus, “think Catholic” must, in the end, mean to dig down to the deepest moral roots of the subsidiarity doctrine. Personally, I have no idea whether Jesus would have supported passing a

capital gains tax cut or repealing the estate tax, but I am certain that He would not want us to ignore needy children or to deny what He called “the least” of His “family”: “I was hungry and you gave me food, thirsty and you gave me drink ... in prison and you visited me ... Amen I say to you, whatever you did for one of these least ... you did for me” (Matthew 25:35, 40).

Liberal cynics can be forgiven for concluding that conservatives start preaching compassion only when they think there is no one left who actually needs it. Because America’s poor are so much better housed and better fed than the poor of any previous generation, because poverty often results from an individual’s own bad choices (for example, dropping out of school, using illegal drugs, committing street crimes, having children outside of marriage), and because post-1996 federal and state welfare-to-work policies have had considerable successes (though by no means the unqualified success often claimed), many conservatives now openly doubt that America still has a serious domestic poverty problem.

They are empirically wrong, and they are morally at risk. Anyone who thinks that America is a post-poverty nation should try living with their family on under \$17,000 a year (roughly the federal poverty-line measure in 2000), as one in five African American children still do. They should plan their next summer vacation in one of the inner-city public housing complexes where, legend has it, everyone maxes out on government benefits and air-conditioners buzz in every window. They should stop by an inner-city social services agency that is placing formerly welfare-dependent adults into jobs all right, but also coping with a rising tide of abandoned children and child-only welfare cases.

They should next visit a state maximum-security prison and read the pre-sentencing investigation reports, summarizing not only the felons’ crimes but also the poverty, abuse, and neglect that most long-term prisoners have suffered. These early life scars do not exonerate these felons, but they do explain why so many Americans behind bars are young males from low-income urban neighborhoods. They should talk to former Philadelphia mayor and Amachi leader Reverend Wilson Goode [WG’69], who can tell them that incarcerated black men in prison have confided to him that they met their own fathers and grandfathers for the first time in prison.

There is far less grinding poverty in America today than there was during the Great Depression and as little as two decades ago. Still, millions of America’s “least of these” still need help—up-close volunteer hours, private donations, public support—from the rest of us and our larger communities, including the national government. “If someone who has worldly means sees a brother in need and refuses him compassion, how can the love of God remain in him: Children, let us love not in word or speech but in deed and truth” (I John 3:17-18).

The godly republic’s faith-based future can be defined mainly by civic compassion in truth and action or it can be defined mainly by ideological, partisan, and religious strife. Which will it be? ♦

**John J. Dilulio Jr. C’80 is the Frederic Fox Leadership Professor of Politics, Religion, and Civil Society and professor of political science. This article is excerpted, with permission of the author, from *Godly Republic: A Centrist Blueprint for America’s Faith-Based Future*, published by the University of California Press.**