



United States Welfare Policy: A Catholic Response (Moral Traditions series)

Thomas J. Massaro

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The Welfare Reform Act of 1996 drastically changed the delivery of social services in the United States for the first time in sixty years. More than a decade later, according to Catholic social ethicist Thomas Massaro, a disturbing gap exists between the laws we have enacted as a nation and the moral concerns we profess as a people.

Massaro contends that ethicists too often focus on strictly theoretical concerns rather than engaging concrete social and political issues, while public policy experts are uncomfortable drawing ethical judgments about legislation. *United States Welfare Policy* takes a fresh approach to the topic by using Catholic social teaching as a lens through which to view contemporary American welfare policies, citing the tradition's emphasis on serving the needy—including a preferential option for the poor—and the common good.

Massaro maintains that the most important outcome of welfare policy is not the cost-effectiveness of programs, but the well-being of individual families. The concluding analysis of this thoughtful study applies Catholic ethical concerns to specific aspects of welfare reform, including the funding mechanisms for the Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) program, work participation requirements affecting the bond between mothers and children, eligibility rules, the intrusion of family caps into reproductive decisions, and the imposition of disproportionate burdens upon particular demographic groups.

Massaro offers possible alternatives in each case and, as the fight over reauthorization of the welfare act continues, he calls on Catholic churches and clergy and laity to take action and advocate publicly for a more ethical approach to welfare reform.

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