Columns
Social Justice



An image of Christ and other merchandise with an image of multibillionaire Elon Musk are displayed on Inauguration Day in Washington Jan. 20, 2025, when Donald Trump was sworn in to his second presidential term. (OSV News/Reuters/Shannon Stapleton)



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February 21, 2025

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Before I entered my community, I worked part time at a food pantry in Indianapolis. The full-time-volunteer executive director and many people I worked with had different politics than I did. Then-Indiana Gov. Mike Pence once visited the food pantry (before I worked there), and his picture hung on the wall.

People who lived in the neighborhood volunteered there, and people drove in from the suburbs to volunteer. We were different races, had different income levels and socioeconomic backgrounds. We had different levels of education. And all of us came together to serve our community, to make sure people had enough food to eat.

I don't work in direct service anymore and don't have as much time for volunteering these days, but I see it in my community in Terre Haute, too, when I do find time to volunteer with one of the local food pantries. It's a human thing, to care for each other.

Now I spend my days in political ministry at the federal level in an increasingly divided nation, and the story on a larger scale looks so different.

Over the past month, many citizens across the United States have watched in horror as the unelected multibillionaire Elon Musk and his appointed team have been dismantling government programs with remarkable speed. Tasked with leading the so-called Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE), Musk is seeking cuts to government to help fund a bill that Republicans are working to get through Congress to provide some $4.5 trillion in tax cuts, mostly targeted to the wealthiest in our nation.

Meanwhile, tens of millions of our fellow Americans don't always know where their next meal is coming from. Funding for key programs that support them are on the chopping block in order to pay for the proposed tax cuts to the wealthiest people in our nation.

Musk "offered" 2 million federal workers the "opportunity" to be laid off with the threat that they might be fired anyway. He shut down the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), which provides critical humanitarian relief around the world, including supporting approximately 50% of the annual budget for Catholic Relief Services.

Musk, whose personal wealth amounts to $392 billion (according to Forbes), thinks that ensuring people can eat is wasteful.

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And it's not only Musk. Jeff Bezos' personal wealth amounts to $236 billion, and Mark Zuckerberg's is $240 billion. The total wealth of the 813 billionaires in the U.S. amounts to $5.7 trillion.

There's no way we can imagine what this amount of wealth means, so let's put it in perspective: 1 million seconds is 11.6 days. 1 billion seconds is 31.7 years.

Or let's try this: It would take one person working 40 hours per week, 52 weeks per year without any time off and earning $20 per hour 24,038 years to earn $1 billion (assuming they had absolutely no living expenses). Musk has nearly 400 times that much money to his name.

Another way to say that: Musk's vast wealth could pay a year's salary of $41,600 to 9.5 million people.

Some of our elected leaders are cozying up to these billionaires, who fund their campaigns. They scapegoat immigrants, trans people and anti-racist initiatives to distract us that their policies serve to allow their billionaire buddies to amass wealth and devastate our social fabric, stripping our communities of decent education, infrastructure, and access to food, housing, and health care.

But there's an alternative: We can put the wealth in our society to work for all of us. Catholic doctrine states, "God entrusted Earth and its resources to the common stewardship of humankind. ... The goods of creation are destined for the whole human race. ... The right to property, acquired by work or received from others by inheritance or gift, does not do away with the original gift of Earth to the whole of humankind" (Catechism of the Catholic Church 2402-2403).

That is to say that the Catholic Church for centuries has held that, for the sake of a more equitable distribution of the fruits of the creation that God has entrusted to all of humanity, government has a legitimate right to levy taxes against those who hold excessive wealth.

If our government took this responsibility seriously, it could start with a small tax of 4% on the wealth of all households over $1 billion. Americans for Tax Fairness explains that this policy alone could ensure universal child care, ensure every family has paid coverage when they need to stay home to care for a sick family member, ensure all children have access to health insurance, offer free community college to everyone, end homelessness, offer universal preschool, build 1,000 new hospitals, ensure schools have enough teachers, and provide free school lunch to every student.

Through small taxes on those who have the most, we could provide a good life for those who live in our communities. We must demand our elected leaders act in our collective best interest so that we can all live in the world as God sees it — one where everyone is fed, clothed, housed and loved.

The existence of billionaires is immoral because they detract from our society's ability to feed, house, clothe, educate and provide health care for all of us. As Jesus said, "Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God" (Matthew 19:24).

As a social media post from a few years ago suggested, no one becomes a billionaire. Once you reach $999 million, you get a trophy that says, "I won capitalism," and every cent beyond that should go to funding our schools, making sure our neighbors have a safe place to live and enough to eat, and ensuring good public spaces.