

God and Caesar, Church and State

The Gospel reading for Sunday, October 18 (the 29th Sunday of Ordinary Time, Year A) had Jesus teaching to “give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar, and give to God what belongs to God.” Matthew 22:15-21 shows Jesus in conflict with the religious leaders of the time and their attempt to force Him into a political category as either for or against Roman occupation. This Gospel is a good starting point for a discussion on the relationship between the Church and the State, and the political responsibilities we Christians have as citizens.

What I present in this talk is taken from a book by Archbishop Charles Chaput, *Render to Caesar: Serving our Nation by Living our Catholic Beliefs in Political Life* (Doubleday, 2008). Page numbers are referenced in the text with parentheses. – Fr. Chris Heath

We Christians are in the world but not of the world. We belong to God, and our home is heaven. But we’re here for a reason: to change the world, for the sake of the world, in the name of Jesus Christ. The work belongs to us. And when we do this, we render to God what is God’s. The idea that we can change the world without engaging what belongs to Caesar, meaning The United States of America, is a delusion. We need to engage in a hands-on way the laws, the structures, the public policies, the habits of mind, and the root causes that sustain injustice in our country. (46) Actively witnessing to and advancing what we believe to be true about key moral issues in public life is a duty – not only of faith but of citizenship. (39) When faith influences politics we are giving to both God and Caesar what is rightfully theirs: a healthy Church and a healthy nation.

The most powerful “political” act Catholics can make is to love Jesus Christ, believe in His Church, and live Her teachings: not just in word but in all of our choices, decisions, and actions – public and private. (74) The nature of the Gospel forces the Church as a community and the individual as a believer to actively engage the world. That means all of it – including its social, economic, and political structures. (76) We must obey Christ’s Great Commission to go into the whole world, proclaim the Good News and baptize everyone who accepts this Gospel.

Democracy is majority rule by the citizens through representative, constitutional government. American democracy does not ask its citizens to put aside their deeply held moral and religious beliefs for the sake of public policy. In fact, it requires exactly the opposite. Our democracy depends on people of character fighting for their beliefs in the public square – legally, ethically, and

nonviolently, but forcefully and without apology. Anything less is a form of theft from the nation's health. (147)

Catholic teaching often has political side effects because it has public implications. (59) Church and state are rightly separate. Both religion and politics, however, address questions of how to live in the world. They always influence each other, and should. (136) The political consequences of [the Church's] message are a by-product of her moral teachings. (42)

During election season, when I speak on moral issues, I often hear parishioners say to me, "hey, separation of church and state!" That phrase is code for "shut up"; it's used to tell me to not speak on matters of faith simply because they might have political side effects. The phrase is thrown around as if it were enshrined in some document, but it's not. It's not in the Constitution, or the Bill of Rights. Thomas Jefferson coined the phrase in a letter to a Baptist congregation to calm their fears that the government could exert power over their church. Jefferson said that is not possible, that it was as if a wall separated the state from influencing church matters. What he did not imply was that the church also had a wall so that religious people could not influence the state. Religion is supposed to influence public and private life. The Church claims no right to dominate the secular realm. But She has every right – in fact an obligation – to engage secular authority and to challenge those wielding it to live the demands of justice. In this sense, the Catholic Church cannot stay, has never stayed, and never will stay "out of politics." Politics involves the exercise of power. The use of power has moral content and human consequences. (217)

Just as nobody wants a state dictating faith and morals, nobody wants a church claiming detailed expertise in public policy or economics. The Church assigned political things to a space not shut off from God, but a space which had its own proper methods and demands. (71) We call it the secular order or the common good, which is not something separate from God or faith. In fact, the founding fathers rightly understood that without a morally good citizenry democracy wouldn't work. George Washington said in his farewell address that it is a mistake to think that "morality can be maintained without religion." (80) The secular order depends on virtues that it cannot generate from within itself. (72) So it relies on Christians, with properly formed moral consciences, (thus giving to God what is God's) to influence the secular order for the sake of the common good (thus giving to Caesar what is Caesar's).

In the Gospel passage, Christ's enemies reveal themselves in their flattery. They're insincere [and Jesus points this out]. He names it for what it is: malice and hypocrisy. He sees their purpose. If he supports paying the tax, He can be cast as a Roman collaborator. If He argues against paying the tax, He can be cast as an anti-Roman agitator. (203) Thus He would be a cause for

political division that they could use against Him. Jesus doesn't answer their question, He does something else. First, He acknowledges that Caesar has rights; that a difference does exist between the things that belong to God and the things that belong to Caesar. Second, He demotes Caesar by suggesting that Caesar has no rights over those things that belong to God. Only God is God, which means Caesar is not God. Caesar's authority has limits. And third, Jesus stays silent about what exactly belongs to either one. Figuring that out belongs to us. And it can be hard work. (204)

So what belongs to Caesar and what belongs to God? To Caesar (government and our representatives) we owe respect and prayers as St. Paul wrote to the Romans; respect for law; obedience to proper authority; and service to the common good. It's a modest list. And note that respect is not subservience, or silence, or inaction, or excuse making, or acquiescence to grave evil in the public life we all share. In fact, ultimately, everything important about human life belongs not to Caesar but to God: our intellect, talents, free will; the people we love, our soul, our moral integrity, our hope for eternal life. These are the things that matter. (218) These are not things given to us by the government. Remember, any right given by the government is a right they can take away. We have inalienable rights, given us by God as our Constitution rightly proclaims. Our humanity is stamped with the image of God. And since we are then His, we must render to our God and Creator what rightly is His to expect. And what He expects is that our beliefs will inform our actions, and our love of God and neighbor will positively affect every area of our personal lives, and in the context of today's Gospel, the health of our nation.