



Twenty-Ninth Sunday in Ordinary Time A
October 18, 2020

- **God and Caesar**
- **Allowing your faith to inform your politics**

Today's Gospel raises the age-old issue of the relationship between Church and State. Many people, perhaps including yourself, believe strongly that Church should stay out of politics. Others believe equally strongly that the Church should speak truth to political power just as the prophets in the Bible spoke God's truth to the political rulers of their day. Of course, the deeper issue in today's Gospel might be: To what extent does each of us recognize God's authority in every area of our lives?

The following three reflections on today's Gospel are worth meditating on every three years or more often. Unfortunately, the first piece does not have an author's name.

We live in a global village now connected by the Internet. There are no innocent bystanders anymore. It is getting progressively more difficult to divide our lives up into Caesar's part and God's part. So a lot of people have accepted the view that religion is a private, personal affair with no public resonance. That implicitly makes bystanders of believers, relegating them to political impotence.

But if we acted on our beliefs, exercised our citizenship and voted our conscience, then profit would not be the bottom line in business, pornography would not pass for art, violence would not be a way of life, comedy would not be reduced to snickers about body parts and no one would be homeless.

But wouldn't that be imposing our views on others? Sure it would or would you rather have others impose their views on you? Aren't you a little tired of being put upon? I know I am. But what can we do about it? They say we cannot mix religion and politics. Sure we can.

The constitutional separation of church and state was not meant to suppress religion or remove it from political debate. It was to prevent the establishment of a single church as in England or a single religion as in Iran.

The founders of our country were convinced that the American experiment could not succeed without the benefit of religious belief. They considered religion to be the backbone of society and the strength of its citizens. Whatever their personal beliefs, they knew religion was good for the country.

And how could it be otherwise? Politics is the social organization of a culture, the structure of a country's values, the daily operation of its beliefs. But religion is the depth dimension of a culture that gives everything else its meaning.

We may not know the morally exact minimum wage, but deep down we know there is a right to a living wage. We may not know the precise proportion of immigration, but deep down we know the human right to emigrate. We may not know the instant of conception, but deep down we recognize the right of life. Deep in the heart of every political issue is a religious belief—unless we believe that God does not care if some of us eat lobster while others starve.

Of course, God cares. So should we. We need to be jolted out of our lethargy, jumpstarted into action. Pictures do it for me better than words. Three times in my life, an image has burned its way into my brain and galvanized my attitude forever. No more explanations, no more excuses, no more apologies, no more waiting for the right moment.

Funny, isn't it that all three of my memorable pictures are of children. And notice the progression through time—from an abandoned child to a dying child to a murdered child. The world is getting to be a more hostile place for children. That may be because children cannot vote. We adults can vote—and we usually vote

for the Caesar with the best promises for us adults. No wonder children get lost in the scuffle.

But God is on the side of the victims. Keep that in mind when you vote in the upcoming elections. Even your vote belongs to God.

Reflecting on the same Gospel, Fr. Flor McCarthy writes:

The question posed to Jesus was an attempt to draw him into the world of politics. Politics has a very bad name today. Politicians are frequently caricatured and laughed at. Hence, Christians tend to opt out of the affairs of the world, and to leave to others dangerous, daring, and responsible things such as politics, law-making, and business. But when they do this they are leaving these things to others who may not be motivated by Christian values and principles.

Christians should not shirk public office, but see it as a chance to serve their fellow men and women and thereby God. The Pharisees opted out of real life and kept themselves apart. The result was a vain religiosity, which had little or nothing to do with life.

Dag Hammarskjöld was Secretary-General of the UN. When he died in a plane crash in Central Africa in 1961 at the age of fifty-six, the world lost a great servant of peace. He was that rare person for whom public service is not simply a career or a means of achieving power, but a religious vocation, a way of being faithful to God. He drew inspiration from the Old Testament prophets. He said, "Indifference to evil is worse than evil itself, and in a free society, some are guilty, but all are responsible."

Gandhi is another example of a deeply religious man who involved himself in politics. He said, "I am in politics because I cannot separate life from belief. Because I believe in God I have to enter politics. Politics is my service of God."

And Nelson Mandela is yet another example. Mandela tells how when he began to get interested in politics a friend tried to warn him, saying, "Politics brings out the worst in people. It is the source of trouble and corruption, and should be avoided at all costs." Fortunately for South Africa and for the world, Mandela ignored his advice.

It's a great pity that politics is so lowly regarded. Politics plays a vital role in creating the kind of society in which we live. What greater vocation is there than to assume responsibility for national and international affairs—to work for peace and justice in the world, for the betterment of human life for all. "No life is more satisfactory than that of selfless service to your country of humanity." (Dag Hammarskjöld)

But politics is not an easy profession, and the temptations are great. The chief temptation is to promote one's own good rather than the good of society. It's not easy for a Christian to be involved in politics and in business today. It means he or she is God's servant and Caesar's too.

Jesus' injunction: "Give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar, and to God what belongs to God" is only a principle. We have to work out the implications of it, and in practice it may not always be easy to draw a clear line between the civil sphere and the religious sphere.

The lines of division are not clearly marked. The boundaries are often blurred and areas overlap. Of course, for a believer, in a sense everything is given to God, even what is given to Caesar. But if it is a question of having to choose one against the other, the Christian has only one choice.

What history shows unequivocally is that separation of Church and State is absolutely essential. However, when Jesus said, "Give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar, and to God what belongs to God," his assumption was that Caesar's claim would be just. He was not giving a blank cheque to Caesar.

A true Christian is at one and the same time a good citizen of his country, and a good citizen of the Kingdom of Heaven. He will fail neither in his duty to God nor to his fellow men and women.

Our first and deepest loyalty is to God. To God alone we render worship; but, in other things, we gladly acknowledge and serve the secular powers, praying that they will rule wisely and justly.

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The first picture was taken during World War II: It shows a Chinese toddler sitting desolate on a deserted railroad track with an empty bowl in hand. I cried that a child was orphaned while adults fought over a piece of land.

The second picture is more recent: An emaciated African boy hunches on the barren ground, too weakened by hunger to move, while a vulture crouches behind him, waiting for him to die. I was saddened that a child could starve while adults argued over food distribution.

A third picture: It pictures a fetus pulled from the womb except for the head; scissors are punching a hole in the base of the skull to allow a tube to suction out the brains. I was angered that a baby could be brutally killed while adults obsessed about their rights.

You're not much help here, Lord . . .

Jay Cormier writes:

As Jesus was teaching, someone approached Jesus with two bumper stickers, one for Barack Obama, one for John McCain. "Teacher, we know that you are a truthful man and that you teach the way of God. Tell us, who should we vote for?" Jesus replied, "Vote for those who will lead you to God's reign. Support those who will establish the Father's kingdom of justice and mercy."

A parent then came up to Jesus and handed him two bills and asked, "Lord, money is tight. Which do I pay first: my house payment or my contribution to my church?" Jesus said, "Give thanks to God for what you have received. Pay to our debtors what is rightly owed them."

A teenager next came up to Jesus. "Jesus, my Confirmation class meets tonight, the same time as football practice for this weekend's big game. Should I come to class or do I meet my obligations to my teammates and coaches?" Jesus blessed him, saying, "Give to God the time he has given you. Give to your team the time the game warrants."

All three—the voter, the homeowner, the teenager—left Jesus as confused as they were when they approached him.

Jesus' answers are not the clear, unambiguous solutions we hope for to these and many other questions. But his response is the heart of living our faith: the struggle to return to God what is God's. Through prayer and discernment, each one of us has to do for ourselves the hard work of deciding exactly what is God's will in our complex world of politics, money and human relationships. Jesus' response to the Pharisees today confronts them—and us—with the demand to act out of our deepest convictions and take responsibility for those actions. The purpose and meaning of life, the path to dealing with the complexities of our time and place, are found in our struggle with our consciences and in the values we hold in the depths of our hearts. Jesus appeals to us to look beyond the simplistic politics and black-and-white legalisms represented by Caesar's coin and realize that we are called to embrace the values centered in a faith that sees the hand of God in all things and recognizes every human being as being part of one human family under the providence of God.

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Reflection Questions

1. To what extent does your religion impact the way you live your daily life?
2. Do you experience a conflict in your efforts to be a loyal Republican or Democrat and a loyal Catholic? For example, there are probably some issues on both platforms that are contrary to the teaching of our Church. How do you resolve this conflict?
3. Jesus tells us: "Render to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what belongs to God." Who do illegal aliens belong to: God or Caesar? Some churches give them sanctuary because they say they belong to God. What do you say?
4. Some say the issues of war and economics belong to Caesar and the bishops have no business sticking their noses into what belongs to the State (Caesar). Others say one cannot separate religion from politics since religious values are supposed to guide and permeate *all* areas of life. What do you say?

This week, let us pray for all who serve in the political field on a local, state or national level.

Have a blessed week,

Fr. Sean