

Religion & Politics
29th Sunday in Ordinary Time (A)
(Mt 22:15-21)

The Gospel shows how Jesus' enemies tried to trap him, using a political question. Even today, the relationship between religion and politics is used as a means to try trap Catholics. This happened as recently as a few weeks ago, when very liberal senators attempted to undermine the appointment of a dedicated Catholic as a federal judge, manifesting the very same malice used against Jesus.¹

Religion is not an obstacle to political involvement, but a help. The more religious one is, the better citizen one will be, the better judge. Unfortunately, rather than push back against the hypocrisy as Jesus did, many Catholic politicians² deny or hide their faith, colluding with the enemy in order to gain office.

In the case of Jesus, they try to trap him with the hot-button political issue of paying taxes to Romans. If he answered yes, they would accuse him of being a bad Jew, since Romans are a foreign Gentile nation that shouldn't be supported. If he answered no, they would get him in trouble with the Romans. Jesus deftly avoided the trap by highlighting the distinction between religion and politics. Since the coin bears Caesar's image, it can be given to him without compromising religion: "*Give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar.*"

This is a fundamentally important precept of Catholic social and political teaching. It will later be echoed by St. Paul, who urges the Christians to be good subjects of their political authorities, praying for and respecting them, dutifully paying their taxes (Rm 13:1-7, 1Tm 2:1-2, Tit 3:1). Catholics have moral obligations toward their civil society and its leaders. They must follow the laws of the land, participate in the political process, fulfill civic duties, serve their country in the military, love their country and promote its welfare, and seek the common good. Being Catholic is an asset to any citizen of any land: Catholics are not the trouble-makers, but the ones who can be looked to for loyalty and commitment.

Catholics are commanded by Christ to "Give to Caesar his due." But Catholics are also commanded to "*Give to God what belongs to God,*" and this is what provokes the rage of the modern establishment. Jesus teaches there are *two* distinct spheres of religion and politics, and each is to be properly acknowledged

¹ During a confirmation hearing on Sep 6, 2017, for 7th Circuit Court of Appeals nominee Amy Coney Barrett, Democratic senators Dianne Feinstein, Dick Durbin, and Mazie Hirono attacked the nominee for her Roman Catholic faith. Said Feinstein, "It is never appropriate for a judge to apply their [sic] personal convictions whether it derives from faith or personal conviction." Said Durbin, "Do you consider yourself an orthodox Catholic?" Said Hirono, "I think your article is very plain in your perspective about the role of religion for judges, and particularly with regard to Catholic judges."

² Such as Dick Durbin

and respected. For the secular atheists, there is only politics and political will (usually imposed by the judges who circumvent the legislative process). Religious authority is viewed as a threat by these enemies of Christ.

The founding fathers of the United States understood very well the unique Christian teaching on religion and politics, and implemented it. It underlies the Constitution and its explicit desire to establish a “limited government.” They were keen to keep government and politics out of religion, by not establishing an official religion. The reason for this was not to undermine religion, but precisely to respect, acknowledge, and promote the religious sphere. The founding fathers understood they were founding a “Nation under God.”

The founders recognized there are two realms, and that religion is the bedrock of society, and the religious authority of God is higher than the political authority of the government, which is limited to the will of the people “under” God. This is why the founders speak of certain “self-evident” truths: man is endowed *by his Creator* (not the civil authority) with certain *inalienable rights*, that civil authority or founding fathers did not give and cannot take away; that among these are “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.”

In the Gospel, Jesus not only proclaims the distinction between religion and politics, he also gives the specific criteria for determining what belongs to each realm: “Whose image does it bear?” Money, finances, commerce, economics, industry, infrastructure, national defense, law and order, taxation – all these things pertain to Caesar, they are the political issues. But man himself in his human nature bears the image and inscription of God (Gn 1:26). Man in his rational nature (reason and will) has a spiritual soul and is fundamentally a spiritual being, higher than the material world. The founding fathers established a society whose principles acknowledged and served this dignity, safeguarding and protecting man’s spiritual and religious liberty.³

Today this foundational principal of a religious society with government explicitly limited to its proper realm, is distorted by a false concept of “Separation of Church and State” which is hostile to religion. Today Caesar usurps to his domain the determination of human rights, and human nature itself. Caesar denies what belongs to God, by legalizing abortion, euthanasia, and genetic engineering; by forbidding prayer, religious festivals, and religious symbols in public institutions; by denying the religious character of the Lord’s Day; and by redefining the institution of marriage and the meaning of sexuality.

³ The Civil War and the ending of legalized slavery was not a violation of the founding principles, but their vindication. The United States become more fully “true to itself” and its Christian roots by abolishing the institution of slavery and giving back to God what never should have been taken from Him in the first place.

Caesar may intervene against religion if the religion oversteps its bounds and starts to get involved in politics, ascribing to itself the authority to dictate various policies and practices which are the competence of the laity working through the political process. A good example of this problem is Islam, a religion which recognizes no distinction between “Church and State,” between God and Caesar. In Islam there is only the religious realm.^{4 5}

On the other hand, the Church must intervene against Caesar when the government oversteps its bounds and starts to deny religion, ascribing to itself the authority which belongs to God alone. A good example of this problem is modern Secularism,⁶ the political philosophy of the leftists/liberals, which recognizes no distinction between “Church and State” in the public sphere. It is atheistic. Religion is “tolerated” only in the private realm, only insofar as it is visibly absent from the public political realm. With Secularism there is only the political realm, religion is suppressed.⁷

Thus Catholics are continually caught up in situations like the one faced by Jesus: malicious enemies on either side who would entrap and condemn us by confusing the important distinction between religion and politics, either reducing all politics to religion, or reducing all religion to politics. Like Jesus, we have the urgent duty to expose and confront this hypocrisy, and reclaim the truth.

This nuanced and important teaching of Jesus alone preserves liberty in a society. Apart from this teaching, there is only tyranny.

⁴ This is why the West is so grateful when Islamic nations have “officially secular” governments (such as Egypt and Turkey currently, but barely). But as is evident from current and past history, “secular” Islamic nations are anomalies, and tend to be transient. They are always opposed, and sooner or later overthrown by the “true” Islamic believers. Iran run by the Ayatollahs, Saudi Arabia which legislates religious laws as secular laws, and the Caliphate of ISIS more accurately reflect the actual Islamic understanding of society built through religious Sharia law.

⁵ The United States, and western governments, would be *fully* within their rights, to restrict and oppose Islam within their borders, since it is an ideology which fundamentally opposes and denies the foundational Christian principle upon which the western nations are built. Islam gives to God what belongs to Caesar.

⁶ Another example would be Communism.

⁷ American and other religious citizens of the West are *fully* within their rights to resist and oppose the legalization of abortion, “gay marriage,” transgender requirements, and the prohibitions against prayer and public display of religion, since these reflect an ideology which fundamentally opposes and denies the foundational Christian principle upon which the western nations are built. Secularists give to Caesar what belongs to God.