

Homily-Give to Caesar

The ACTS weekend was an experience of experiencing God's healing and forgives. Our theme was discipleship which highlights the fact that we are not merely to experience God's healing and to stay where we are in faith but instead to go out and fully live out our faith.

In the Gospel of today two groups of opponents of Jesus come together to trap him in speech. The debate is about paying the census tax which is a tax which the Jewish people deeply resented as it was a sign of their subjugation to Rome. The Pharisees were a group within society who opposed the tax. The Jewish supporters of the Herod family complied with the tax and probably embraced it. Representatives of the two groups ask Jesus, "Is it lawful to pay tax to the emperor (Matthew 22:17)?" If Jesus tells the group to pay the tax the Pharisees and their supporters will turn against him. If he says don't pay the tax, the Herodians and their allies will report him to the Roman officials, who will in turn arrest him as a revolutionary.

Jesus' basic advice is "Pay the tax." According to Daniel Harrington Jesus' is basing his reasoning on the fact that the Jewish people are part of the Roman empire, were integrated into Caesar's system and were using coins marked with Caesar's image on it. But the real emphasis comes in the last few words of Jesus, "Repay to God what belongs to God." The point is that our entire lives should be given to God. This includes not only our individual, family and spiritual lives but our political lives as well.

This Gospel has been understood to speak about the relationship between church and state. It is often understood to mean that there should be a complete separation between church and state. There are two ways that the relationship between church and state is described in the New Testament. In Romans 13 Paul paints an ideal picture of the Roman Empire and urges the Christians in Rome to be good citizens, to cooperate with the imperial officials and to pay their taxes. In the Book of Revelation, however, John vehemently criticizes the Roman Empire, because apparently some of its local officials in Asia Minor (present-day Turkey) were forcing Christians to worship the emperor as a god. Jesus' attitude seems to fit between these two extreme views.

In the living out of our faith we are not called make blind nationalism a part of our practice of religion. We are to judge our political system by the values of the Scriptures and of Catholic teaching. We are not called to completely separate our faith from our citizenship. Instead we are engage the political system with our Gospel values of faith, love of enemies, care for the least among us, peace and protection of all human life. We are also to use Catholic values to help shape the direction of our city, state and nation.

In just over two weeks our country will elect a new president. In their document, Faithful Citizenship, the bishops of the United States have called on us to be active citizens. They call on Americans to form their consciences around the major issues of the day and to vote.

FORMATION OF CONSCIENCE

Conscience is the ability to hear the voice of God within. A well formed conscience does what is good and shuns what is evil. Formation of conscience thrives on our openness to the voice of God in Scripture, to the teaching of the church, and the prayerful discernment of the true dimensions of the concrete choice before us.

The Bishops of the United States state that Catholics are not single issue voters. They indicate that a candidate's position on a single issue is not sufficient to guarantee a voter's support. Yet a candidate's position on a single issue that involves an intrinsic evil, such as support for legal abortion or the promotion of racism, may legitimately lead a voter to disqualify a candidate from receiving support

PRINCIPLES

The Bishops of the United States list seven principles of Catholic Social teaching which they hold to be of great importance in making a decision in this election.

The Right to Life and the Dignity of the Human Person

The bishops state that all human beings are children of God. Chief among the life issues are abortion and euthanasia. Abortion which is the deliberate killing of a human being before birth, is never morally acceptable, and must always be opposed. Cloning and destruction of human embryos for research or even for potential cures is always wrong. Genocide, torture, and the direct and intentional targeting of noncombatants in war or terrorist attacks are always wrong.

The USCCB calls for greater assistance for those who are sick and dying through health care for all and effective and compassionate palliative care. Catholics must work to avoid war and to promote peace. Nations must find more effective ways to prevent conflicts, to resolve them by peaceful means and to promote reconstruction and reconciliation in the wake of conflicts. The Bishops support a "responsible transition" that ends the war in a way that recognizes the continuing threat of fanatical extremism, minimizes the loss of life and the need to protect human rights in the area. Society has a duty to defend life against violence and reach out to victims of crime. Yet our nation's continued reliance on the death penalty cannot be justified.

Call to Family, Community and Participation

The human person is both sacred and social. Full human development takes place within relationships. Marriage is to be protected.

Marriage must be defined, recognized, and protected as a lifelong commitment between a man and a woman. Policies on taxes, work, divorce, immigration and welfare should help families to stay together and should reward responsibility and sacrifice for children. Wages should allow workers to support their families, and public assistance should be available to help poor families live in dignity.

Government, through such means as tax credits and publicly funded scholarships, should help provide resources to parents, especially those of modest means to exercise the right to choice in education without discrimination.

Rights and Responsibilities

Human dignity is respected and the common good is fostered only if human rights are protected and basic responsibilities are met. Every human being has a right to life and a right to those things required for human decency – food and shelter, education, and employment, health care and housing, freedom of religion and family life.

Affordable and accessible health care is an essential safeguard of human life and a fundamental human right. With an estimated 47 million Americans lacking health care coverage, it is also an urgent national priority. Reform of the nation’s health care system needs to be rooted in values that respect human dignity, protect human life and meet the needs of the uninsured, especially born and unborn children, pregnant women, immigrants and other vulnerable populations. Corresponding to these rights are responsibilities – to one another, to our families and to the larger society.

Option for the Poor and Vulnerable

While the common good embraces all, those who are weak, vulnerable, and most in need deserve preferential concern. A basic moral test for our society is how we treat the most vulnerable in our midst. In a society marred by deepening disparities between rich and poor, Scripture gives us the story of the Last Judgment and reminds us that we will be judged by our response to the “least among us.”

Dignity of Work and the Rights of Workers

The economy must serve people not the other way around. Employers contribute to the common good through the services or products they provide and by creating jobs that uphold the dignity and rights of workers—to productive work, to decent and just wages, to adequate benefits and security in their old age, to the choice of whether to organize and join unions, to the opportunity for legal status for immigrant workers, to private property, and to economic initiative.

Economic decisions and institutions should be assessed according to whether they protect or undermine the dignity of the human person. Social and economic policies should foster the creation of jobs for all who can work with decent working conditions and just wages.

Solidarity

We are one human family, whatever our national, racial, ethnic, economic, and ideological differences. We are our brothers and sisters keepers, wherever they may be. Loving our neighbor has global dimensions and requires us to eradicate racism and address the extreme poverty and disease plaguing so much of the world. Solidarity also includes the Scriptural call to welcome the stranger among us – including immigrants seeking work, a safe home, education for their children, and a decent life for their families.

Caring for God’s Creation

We show respect for the Creator by our stewardship of God’s creation. Care for the earth is a duty of our faith and a sign of our concern for all people. We have a moral obligation to protect the planet upon which we live—to respect God’s creation and to ensure a safe and hospitable environment for human beings, especially children at their most vulnerable stages of development. As stewards called by God to share the responsibility for the future of the earth, we should work for a world in which people respect and protect all of creation and seek to live simply in harmony with it for the sake of future generations.

Goals for Political Life

The American Bishops end Faithful Citizenship by offering ten goals to help Catholics in the formation of their consciences. The bishops write, “We hope Catholics will ask candidates how they intend to help our nation pursue these important goals:”

1. Address the preeminent requirement to protect the weakest in our midst—innocent unborn children—by restricting and bringing to an end the destruction of unborn children through abortion.
2. Keep our nation from turning to violence to address fundamental problems—a million abortions each year to deal with unwanted pregnancies, euthanasia and assisted suicide to deal with the burdens of illness and disability, the destruction of human embryos in the name of research, the use of the death penalty to combat crime, and imprudent resort to war to address international disputes.

3. Define the central institution of marriage as a union between one man and one woman, and provide better support for family life morally, socially, and economically, so that our nation helps parents raise their children with respect for life, sound moral values and an ethic of stewardship and responsibility.
4. Achieve comprehensive immigration reform that secures our borders, treats immigrant workers fairly, offers an earned path to citizenship, respects the rule of law, and addresses the factors that compel people to leave their own countries.
5. Help families and children overcome poverty: ensuring access to and choice in education, as well as decent work at fair, living wages and adequate assistance for the vulnerable in our nation, while also helping to overcome widespread hunger and poverty around the world, especially in the areas of development assistance, debt relief, and international trade.
6. Provide health care for the growing number of people without it, while respecting human life, human dignity, and religious freedom in our health care system.
7. Continue to oppose policies that reflect prejudice, hostility toward immigrants, religious bigotry, and other forms of discrimination.
8. Encourage families, community groups, economic structures, and government to work together to overcome poverty, pursue the common good, and care for creation, with full respect for religious groups and their right to address social needs in accord with their basic moral convictions.
9. Establish and comply with moral limits on the use of military force—examining for what purposes it may be used, under what authority, and at what human cost—and work for a “responsible transition” to end the war in Iraq.
10. Join with others around the world to pursue peace, protect human rights and religious liberty, and advance economic justice and care for creation.

Conclusion

I invite all parishioners to form their consciences around these important issues and to vote. I also encourage parishioners to engage the political system through letting politicians you're your views on these important issues, through writing Op Ed pieces for the Newsstar, through financially supporting candidates, and through becoming involved in organizations that attempt to work with our political system to make change for the better.

You may read the Faithful Citizenship document upon which this homily is based by googling "Faithful Citizenship." You may also find this homily on the JGS web-site.