

“WE HAVE NO KING BUT CAESAR:”

Some thoughts on Catholic faith and public life

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A priest I know does a lot of spiritual direction. Two of the men he was helping died suddenly this past year, one of a heart attack and one of a stroke. In both cases they were relatively young men and quite successful. In both cases they watched Fox News. And in both cases they had gotten into the nightly habit of shouting at President Obama whenever he came on the TV. In both cases, the wives believed – and they still believe – that politics killed their husbands.

Now that’s a true story. And it’s a good place to begin our time together today. Henri de Lubac, the great Jesuit theologian, once said that if heretics no longer horrify us, it’s not because we have more charity in our hearts.¹ We just find it a lot more satisfying to despise our political opponents. We’ve transferred our passion to politics.

My theme today is living the Catholic faith in public life, including our political life. But in talking about it, I need to make a few preliminary points.

Here’s my first point. It’s very simple. *We’re mortal. We’re going to die.* American culture spends a huge amount of energy ignoring death, delaying it and distracting us from thinking about it. But our time in this world is very limited; science can’t fix the problem; and there’s no government bailout program. Life is precious. Time *matters*. So does the way we use it. And as all of the great saints understood, thinking a little about our death can have a wonderfully medicinal effect on human behavior.

The reason is obvious. If we believe in an afterlife where we’re held accountable for our actions, then that belief has very practical implications for our choices *in this world*. Obviously, some people don’t believe in God or an afterlife, and they need to act in a way that conforms to their convictions. But that doesn’t absolve us from following ours.

For Christians, the trinity of virtues we call faith, hope and charity should shape everything we do, both privately and in our public lives. Faith in God gives us hope in eternal life. Hope casts out fear and enables us to love. And the love of God and other human persons – the virtue of charity – is the animating spirit of all authentically Christian political action. By love I don’t mean “love” in a sentimental or indulgent sense, the kind of empty love that offers “tolerance” as an alibi for inaction in the face of evil. I mean love in the Christian sense; love with a heart of *courage*, love *determined* to build justice in society and focused on the *true* good of the *whole* human person, body and soul.

Human progress means more than getting more stuff, more entitlements and more personal license. Real progress always includes man’s spiritual nature. Real progress satisfies the human

hunger for solidarity and communion. So when our leaders and their slogans tell us to move “forward,” we need to take a very hard look at the road we’re on, where “forward” leads, and whether it ennoble the human soul, or just aggravates our selfishness and appetite for things.

What all this means for our public life is this: Catholics can live quite peacefully with the separation of Church and state, *so long as* the arrangement translates into real religious freedom. But we can never accept a separation of our religious faith and moral convictions from our public ministries or our political engagement. It’s impossible. And even *trying* is evil because it forces us to live two different lives, worshiping God at home and in our churches; and worshiping the latest version of Caesar everywhere else. That turns our private convictions into lies we tell ourselves and each other.

Here’s my second point. *Religious faith sincerely believed and humbly lived serves human dignity. It fosters virtue, not conflict. Therefore it can be vital in building a humane society.* This should be too obvious to mention. But one of the key assumptions of the modern secular state – in effect, secularism’s creation myth -- is that religion is naturally prone to violence because it’s irrational and divisive. Secular, *non*-religious authority, on the other hand, is allegedly rational and unitive. Therefore the job of secular authority is peacemaking; in other words, to keep religious fanatics from killing each other and everybody else.

The problem with that line of thought is this: It’s an Enlightenment fantasy. Plenty of violence -- terrible violence -- has been done in the name of God by believers from every major religious tradition. We’re seeing some of it play out right now in the Middle East. I have no desire to excuse any of it.

But as scholars like Brad Gregory and William Cavanaugh have shown, based on the historical record, there’s no persuasive evidence that religious belief is any more prone to provoking violence than secular politics and ideologies.ⁱⁱ The murder regimes of the last century were overwhelmingly secular, atheist and based on bizarre claims of being “scientific.” Cavanaugh notes that even in the so-called Wars of Religion in the 16th Century, “For the main instigators of the carnage, doctrinal loyalties were at best secondary to their stake in the rise or defeat of the centralized state.”ⁱⁱⁱ For Cavanaugh, the rise of the sovereign state was a cause, not the solution, of Europe’s religious wars.^{iv}

What’s really going on in much of today’s hand-wringing about religious extremism and looming theocracy is a pretty straightforward push by America’s secular leadership classes to get religion out of the way. God is a competitor in forming the public will. So God needs to go.

Here’s my third point. *Man is a moral and believing animal.* Christian Smith, Notre Dame’s distinguished social research scholar, notes that all human beings seem to have a natural capacity for religious faith. That *doesn’t* imply that all people are “naturally religious,” if we mean by that an instinctive need to worship God in a Western sense. Some cultures – Japan is among them -- seem to get along quite well without Western notions of religion. But *all* human beings, everywhere and always, have a need to believe *something* and behave according to a moral code that distinguishes right from wrong.

Why is that important? It's important because any claim that atheists, agnostics and a secularized intelligentsia are naturally more "rational" than religious believers is nonsense. There *are* no unbelievers. Smith puts it this way:

"All human beings are believers, not 'knowers' who know with certitude. Everything we know is grounded on presupposed beliefs that cannot be verified with more fundamental proof or certainty that provides us with assurance they are true. That is just as true for atheists as for religious adherents. The quest for foundationalist certainty . . . is a distinctly modern project, one launched as a response to the instabilities and uncertainties of early modern Europe. But that modern project has failed. There is no universal, rational foundation upon which indubitably certain knowledge can be built. All human knowing is built on believing. That is the human condition."^v

To put it another way, atheists just worship a smaller and less forgiving god, at a different altar. And that means Christians should make no apologies – none at all -- for engaging public issues respectfully but vigorously, guided by their faith as well as their reason.

That raises an obvious question: What would a *proper* Christian approach to politics look like? John Courtney Murray, the Jesuit scholar who spoke so forcefully about the dignity of American democracy and religious freedom, once wrote: "The Holy Spirit does not descend into the City of Man in the form of a dove. He comes only in the endlessly energetic spirit of justice and love that dwells in the man of the City, the layman."^{vi}

Here's what that means. Christianity is not *mainly* about politics. It's about living and sharing the love of God. And Christian political engagement, when it happens, is never *mainly* the task of the clergy. That work belongs to lay believers who live most intensely in the world. Christian faith is not a set of ethics or doctrines. It's not a group of theories about social and economic justice. All these things have their place. All of them can be important. But a Christian life begins in a relationship with Jesus Christ; and it bears fruit in the justice, mercy and love we show to others because of that relationship.

Jesus said, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it. You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the law and the prophets" (Mt 22:37-40).

That's the test of our faith. Without a passion for Jesus Christ in our hearts that reshapes our lives, Christianity is just a word game and a legend. *Relationships have consequences.* A married man will commit himself to certain actions and behaviors, no matter what the cost, out of the love he bears for his wife. Our relationship with God is the same. We need to prove our love by our actions, not just in our personal and family lives, but also in the public square. And that includes our social and business relations, as well as our politics.

Christians individually, and the Church as a believing community, engage the political order as *an obligation of the Word of God.* Human law teaches and forms as well as regulates; and human politics is the exercise of power – which means that both law and politics have moral

implications. Christians can't ignore those implications and still remain faithful to their vocation as a light to the world and salt of the earth (Mt 5:14-16).

Robert Dodaro, the Augustinian priest and scholar – who's spoken here at Villanova in the past -- wrote a wonderful book a few years ago called *Christ and the Just Society in the Thought of Augustine*. In his book and elsewhere, Dodaro makes four key points about Augustine's view of Christianity and politics.^{vii}

First, Augustine never really offers a political theory, and there's a reason. He doesn't believe human beings can know or create perfect justice in this world. Our judgment is always flawed by our sinfulness. Therefore, the right starting point for any Christian politics is humility, modesty and a very sober realism.

Second, no political order, no matter how seemingly good, can ever constitute a just society. Errors in moral judgment can't be avoided. These errors grow in their complexity as they move from lower to higher levels of society and governance – which, by the way, shows the wisdom of the Catholic principle of subsidiarity. In practice, the Christian needs to be loyal to her nation and obedient to its legitimate rulers. But she also needs to cultivate a critical vigilance about both.

Third, despite these concerns, Christians still have a duty to take part in public life according to their God-given abilities, even when their faith brings them into conflict with public authority. We can't simply ignore or withdraw from civic affairs. The reason is simple. The classic civic virtues named by Cicero – prudence, justice, fortitude and temperance – can be renewed and elevated, to the benefit of all citizens, by the Christian virtues of faith, hope and charity. Therefore, political engagement is a worthy Christian task, and public office is an honorable Christian vocation.

Fourth, in governing as best they can, while conforming their lives and their judgment to the content of the Gospel, Christian leaders in public life *can* accomplish real good. In other words, they *can* make a difference. Their success will always be limited and mixed. It will never be ideal. But with the help of God they can improve the moral quality of society, which makes the effort invaluable.

What Augustine believes about Christian leaders, we can extend to the vocation of all Christian citizens. The skills of the Christian citizen are finally very simple: a zeal for Jesus Christ and his Church; a conscience formed in humility, love for the truth, and rooted in Scripture and the believing community; the prudence to see which issues in public life are vital and foundational to human dignity, and which ones are not; and the courage to work for what's right.

We don't cultivate these skills alone. We develop them together as Christians, in prayer, on our knees, in the presence of Jesus Christ – and also in exchanges like our time together today.

As I was gathering my thoughts for today, I listed all the urgent issues that demand our attention as Catholics: poverty; unemployment; crippling federal deficits; immigration; abortion; our obligations to the elderly and the disabled; questions of war and peace; our national confusion

about sexual identity and human nature, and the attacks on marriage and family life that flow from this confusion; the growing disconnection of our science and technology from real moral reflection; the erosion of freedom of conscience in our national health-care debates; the quality of the schools that form our children.

The list is long. As I've said many times before and believe just as strongly today: *Abortion is the foundational human rights issue of our lifetime*. It can't be ignored or alibied away. We need to do everything we can to support the dignity of women, especially women with broken families or under heavy emotional and financial stress. Our commitment needs to be real, and more than just words. But we can't do it at the cost of more than 50 million legalized killings since *Roe v Wade*. We can't do it with corrupt verbal gymnastics that reduce an unborn child to a non-person and a thing. And we can't claim to be concerned about "the poor" when we tolerate – and even fund -- an abortion industry that kills the unborn children of poor people in disproportionate numbers, both here in the United States, and through government aid abroad.

Working to give women the kind of material help they need so they can choose *against* abortion and *for* the life of their child is a good thing; a vital and *necessary* thing. But it's *not sufficient*. It's not a substitute for laws that protect developing unborn life – laws that restrict and one day end permissive abortion. Again, law teaches and forms, as well as regulates. It's a moral exercise. It always embodies someone's idea of what we ought or ought not to do. Obviously we can't illegalize every sin and evil act in society. But we can at least try to stop killing the innocent, which is what every abortion involves.

The abortion debate is important for another reason as well; one that's less obvious but in a way just as troubling. The case for "reproductive rights" hinges on a politically pious and very American form of idolatry: the idolatry of choice, personal autonomy and an assertion of the self at the expense of others. This is ruinous for human community.

Selfishness dressed up as individual freedom has always been part of American life. But now it infects the whole fabric of consumer society. American life is becoming a cycle of manufactured appetites, illusions and licenses that turns people in on themselves and away from each other. As communities of common belief and action dissolve, the state fills in the void they leave. And that suits a lot of us just fine, because if the government takes responsibility for the poor, we don't have to.

I'm using a broad brush here, obviously. In Catholic social thought, government has a legitimate role – sometimes a really crucial role -- in addressing social problems that are too big and too serious to be handled by anyone else. But Jesus didn't bless higher taxes, deficit spending and more food stamps, any more than he endorsed the free market.

The way we lead our public lives needs to embody what the Catholic faith teaches -- not what our personalized edition of Christianity feels comfortable with, but the real thing; the full package; what the Church actually holds to be true. In other words, *we need to be Catholics first and political creatures second*.

The more we transfer our passion for Jesus Christ to some political messiah or party platform,

the more bitter we feel toward his Church when she speaks against the idols we set up in our own hearts. There's no more damning moment in all of Scripture than John 19:15: "We have no king but Caesar." The only king Christians have is Jesus Christ. The obligation to seek and serve the truth belongs to *each of us personally*. The duty to love and help our neighbor belongs to *each of us personally*. We can't ignore or delegate away these personal duties to anyone else or any government agency.

More than 1,600 years ago, St. Basil the Great warned his wealthy fellow Christians that "The bread you possess belongs to the hungry. The clothing you store in boxes belongs to the naked."^{viii} St. John Chrysostom – whose feast we celebrated just yesterday – preached exactly the same message: "God does not want golden vessels but golden hearts," and "for those who neglect their neighbor, a hell awaits with an inextinguishable fire in the company of the demons."^{ix} What was true then is true now. Hell is not a metaphor. Hell is real. Jesus spoke about it *many* times and without any ambiguity. If we do not help the poor, we'll go to hell. I'll say it again: *If we do not help the poor, we will go to hell.*

And who are the poor? They're the people we so often try to look away from -- people who are homeless or dying or unemployed or mentally disabled. They're also the unborn child who has a right to God's gift of life, and the single mother who looks to us for compassion and material support. Above all, they're the persons in need that God presents to each of us not as a "policy issue," but right here, right now, in our daily lives.

Thomas of Villanova, the great Augustinian saint for whom this university is named, is remembered for his skills as a scholar and reforming bishop. But even more important was his passion for serving the poor; his zeal for penetrating the entire world around him with the virtues of justice and Christian love. It's a privilege to stand here and speak in his shadow.

Time matters. God will hold us accountable for the way we use it. Law and politics shape the course of a nation's future. Very few vocations have more importance or more dignity when they're lived with humility, honesty and love.

But all of us who call ourselves Christians share the same vocation to love God first and above all things; and to love our neighbor as ourselves. We're citizens of heaven first; but we have obligations here. *We're Catholics and Christians first.* And if we live that way -- zealously and selflessly in our public lives -- our country will be the better for it; and God will use us to help make the world new.

ⁱ Henri de Lubac, S.J., *Paradoxes*, Ignatius Press, San Francisco, 1987; p. 226

ⁱⁱ See William T. Cavanaugh, *The Myth of Religious Violence: Secular Ideology and the Roots of Modern Conflict*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2009; and Brad S. Gregory, *The Unintended Reformation: How a Religious Revolution Secularized Society*, Belknap/Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, 2012

ⁱⁱⁱ Cavanaugh, "A Fire Strong Enough to Consume the House: The Wars of Religion and the Rise of the State," *Modern Theology*, 11:4 October 1995; p. 401

^{iv} Cavanaugh, "If You Render to God What is God's, What is Left for Caesar?," *Review of Politics*, 71, 2009; p. 610

^v Christian Smith, "Man the Religious Animal," *First Things*, 222, April 2012; p. 30. See also Smith's *Moral, Believing Animals: Human Personhood and Culture*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2003

^{vi} John Courtney Murray, S.J., "The Role of Faith in the Renovation of the World," 1948; Murray's works are available online from the Woodstock Theological Center Library

^{vii} Robert Dodaro, O.S.A., private correspondence with the author, along with *Christ and the Just Society in the Thought of Augustine*, Cambridge University Press, 2008 (first published in 2004), and "Ecclesia and Res Publica: How Augustinian Are Neo-Augustinian Politics?," collected in *Augustine and Post-Modern Thought: A New Alliance Against Modernity?*, Peeters, editor, [Bibliotheca Ephemeridum Theologicarum Lovaniensium](#), 2009

^{viii} Basil, *Homily on Avarice*

^{ix} John Chrysostom, *Homily on Matthew*