

Twenty-Fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year A
Is 45:1, 4-6
Ps 96 *passim*
1 Thess 1:1-5b
Mt 22:15-21

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St. Petronille Parish, Glen Ellyn
Sunday, October 18, 2020

Who would have thought that in the thick of the campaign season, in the run-up to our national election, our Sunday Gospel would present an outstanding example of a “gotcha” question? Gotcha! It’s designed to trap; it’s not an invitation to dialog or a request for information; it’s an attempt to box the one being questioned into a corner.

Here, the enemies of Jesus are gathering. They ask, “So, Jesus, is it okay to pay our taxes to Caesar?” If Jesus answers no, then he makes himself an enemy of Rome. If he answers yes, then he loses the support of the people. Jesus sidesteps the question and says we should render unto Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God.

Jesus points to two zones. One zone belongs to Caesar, and the other belongs to God. Now we Americans, who are steeped in the mentality of a wall of separation between Church and State, we might easily misunderstand Jesus’s meaning. He’s not proclaiming that the civil government is on the one side and the domain of God is on the other. No, *everything* belongs to God; God’s domain reaches everywhere and to every aspect of our lives. Caesar has his domain, sure, and it is legitimate – but Caesar’s domain is surrounded by the reign of God. As we journey on in seeking, knowing, and loving the God who made us, we are called to bear in mind the sovereignty of God; while also carrying out our civic responsibilities.

God’s sovereignty is one of the founding principles of our nation. The Declaration of Independence: “We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all [human beings] are created equal, that [all human beings] are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights, . . .” Our pledge of allegiance: “One nation, under God, . . .” Our currency: “In God we trust.”

The fourth stanza of the Star-Spangled Banner contains these lines:

*Blest with vict’ry and peace, may this Heav’n-rescued land
Praise the power that hath made and preserved us a nation!
Then conquer we must, when our cause it is just,
And this be our motto: “In God is our trust.”*

As a child in elementary school, among our patriotic songs I learned the song America. “My country ‘tis of thee, . . .” We were taught a second verse, which is actually a prayer:

*Our fathers' God, to thee, Author of liberty, to thee we sing.
Long may our land be bright, with freedom's holy light.
Protect us by thy might, great God our King.*

Acknowledging God's sovereignty is woven into our national DNA. If you prefer another metaphor, faith in God is hard-wired into our nation's circuitry.

The Catholic bishops have designated October as Respect Life Month. Catholic teaching calls us to uphold the sanctity of human life from its beginning to its natural end. In 1973, the Supreme Court interpreted our Constitution as containing, somewhere, the right to kill our unborn children. As a constitutional right, abortion has been grafted into our national DNA, soldered into our national circuitry. There is a tension between our moral code and our nation's culture. How does the faithful Catholic deal with that tension at the ballot box?

Our Church, speaking through the teaching authority of our bishops, has given clear guidance on how we should go about deciding whom or what to vote for. They tell us [a] to pray, [b] to consider the values, principles, and programs the candidates and their parties espouse, and [c] to weigh them against each other soberly and conscientiously, [d] recognizing that some elements weigh more heavily in the balance than others. If you vote for pro-abortion candidates, your vote must be the product of that balancing exercise. In other words, you are voting for the pro-abortion candidates *despite* and *not because* of their position on abortion.

After the Roe v Wade decision in 1973, Catholics had to wrestle with the question of whether we would be contributing to the killing of unborn children by paying our taxes. We have not had to worry about that question since 1976, when Congress enacted and the president signed the Hyde Amendment. I may be oversimplifying, but suffice it to say that the Hyde Amendment prohibits the federal government from funding abortions. One of our national political parties has put repeal of the Hyde Amendment in its platform, and that party's candidates for president and vice president have said that repeal of the Hyde Amendment is high on their agenda. If they are elected, they have promised that our taxes will fund abortion on demand. We Catholics will again face the question: Is it ok to pay our taxes? Frankly I don't know what our response will be; I will look to the Catholic bishops for their guidance and direction.

Voting is a civic duty. Voting conscientiously and with a great deal of care and prayer is a moral obligation. Someone at a town hall this week complimented the president on his nice smile; fortunately, she did not indicate that his nice smile would be the basis for her vote. An election is not a likeability contest; elections ought not to be won or lost on

style points. A conscientious Christian bases her or his vote on actions, policies, and results.

In today's Gospel Jesus is telling us to engage in public life and to carry out our civic duties. I don't know, for sure, which candidates and propositions Jesus would vote for. I have friends who are good and faithful Catholics on both sides of the political divide, people I love and whose opinions I respect. The Church, in the person of our bishops, lays out the principles we uphold and the stakes that are at risk. They leave the choice up to what they call our prudential judgment. As we journey onward on our mission to seek, know, and love the God who made us, we must each decide which choice will be to the greater honor and glory of God.