

CATHOLICS AND POLITICAL LIFE: A PASTORAL LETTER

By Archbishop Alfred C. Hughes

The respective claims of Caesar and God

One of the more dramatic moments in the last months of Jesus' earthly life occurred when the Pharisees and Herodians posed the question: "Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar or not?" (Matt 22:17). They wanted to trap Jesus in the midst of a heated political controversy with profound religious overtones. He asked for a coin used for paying taxes and replied, "Render therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God's" (Matt 22:21).

The First Amendment of the Constitution of the United States provides for the free exercise of religion as well as a prohibition against the country's establishment of any one religion. The free exercise and non-establishment clauses in the Constitution serve to protect the freedom of religion, while recognizing the proper role of government in advancing the common good. In both Sacred Scripture and the United States Constitution, there is a provision to honor the twin duties to obey God and be a responsible citizen. In our own time, we face the tension of these twin responsibilities.

Responsible Citizenship

Each person is social by nature. We live in a society organized according to the principle of unity that promotes the common good. In order to advance the common good, we are called to participate in the public life of society. One of the fundamental ways we participate is through responsible political activity. The manner and degree of participation in political life will vary with our calling. Most of us are called to participate through exercising the duty to vote. Others will take a more active role in the political process, such as becoming involved in various political activities, even to the point of seeking office.

Regardless of our level of participation, responsible citizenship requires that we promote justice, freedom, peace and the common good. Essential to such responsible citizenship is the obligation to promote those laws and policies which respect all of human life.

Faithful Citizenship

After the right to life, freedom of conscience is the most important human right. Citizens who are believers recognize that God has ultimate dominion over their lives. It is the role of the state to provide for and protect the freedom of each citizen to respond to God. In addition, responsible government should want that all citizens, whether people of faith or not, contribute to the development of public policy rooted in the natural moral law.

When Jesus was confronted with the question of the legitimacy of paying the tax to Caesar, he responded by articulating a two-fold principle. The state has the right to collect taxes, for example, in order to provide necessary services and promote domestic tranquility. The Church, guided by revelation and right reason, must speak God's truth in every circumstance. The state can never legitimately deny or suppress these truths. As Peter said when forbidden to proclaim the message of Jesus Christ: "We must obey God rather than men" (Acts 5:29).

Our country rightfully values tolerance. True tolerance requires that we bring an authentic respect for the freedom of conscience of each individual person. It does not, however, enjoin upon us the duty to accept competing positions on truth as having equal value or deserving of the same respect. Rightful pluralism is not the same as moral relativism. A society that does not hold to certain fundamental universal truths cannot long endure.

The Role of the Church

The Lord Jesus entrusted to his Church the responsibility to hand on the Gospel to subsequent generations through fidelity to the creed, participation in the sacramental life and a desire for the true good as the goal of our actions.

The Catholic Church teaches truths of faith and morals. Baptized Catholics have a responsibility to accept the truths of faith and morals which the Church teaches are fundamental for faithful living.

The Catholic Church also teaches fundamental and universal moral truths written on the heart of the human person. The Church has a mission to proclaim in the public square these truths which shed light on the natural moral law. Such a proclamation, when addressing universal moral truth, is not sectarian, but in service to the common good. The contemporary desire to privatize all faith must be resisted. Faith must contribute to and inform public life. To be sure, participation must be characterized by charity, justice and fidelity. What is not acceptable is to ban believers from participation in the shaping of public policy.

Defining Issues

Pope John Paul II began his encyclical, "The Gospel of Life," with these words: "The Gospel of Life is at the heart of Jesus' message, lovingly received day after day by the Church. It is to be preached with dauntless fidelity as 'good news' to the people of every age and culture" (No. 1). The defining issue is our fundamental attitude toward the sacredness of human life.

Respect for life includes a number of issues: the sacredness of unborn life; the inviolability of the human embryo in the face of some destructive bio-technological procedures; the sanctity of one's own life or the lives of others which forbids suicide, homicide, euthanasia or the removal of ordinary means of human support at the end of life; the difficult question of capital punishment for those guilty of heinous crime; the always problematic decisions regarding war. Each of these life issues is linked to one another by a respect for the dignity and sacredness of human life. Each, however, is subject to a distinctive moral analysis. For example, we can never accept abortion, the destruction of embryonic cells or human cloning, euthanasia or physician assisted suicide. We may not perform an evil act in order to achieve some real or apparent benefit.

We must carefully distinguish these defining issues that touch upon realities that are absolute from those issues about which there is a legitimate exercise of human prudential judgment. For instance, while it is incumbent upon all to preserve a deep respect for human life, there is a role for human prudential judgment in determining whether the conditions that make capital punishment permissible are realized. Our Holy Father and the Bishops in the United States have indicated that in our own time it is usually possible to protect citizens from perpetrators of heinous crime by means that do not require capital punishment. Hence, we should reject capital punishment in most instances, but not necessarily all.

In addressing issues of the pursuit of peace and the moral necessity of protecting a people against violence in military action, there is room for moral assessment whether the conditions for engaging in a military action or the means used to prosecute such action can be morally justified. While it is not permitted to support legislation which violates basic human rights, there is a legitimate freedom for promoting different policies and strategies. While racism is always wrong, human prudential judgment is going to be needed in the development of the best public policy to counteract racist practice in life.

The Co-responsibility of Catholics for Public Policy

As Catholics we have a duty to be informed about the moral issues that impact public policy. We need to communicate with publicly elected officials about these issues. It is our responsibility to support those candidates who best espouse and actively promote the universal natural moral law. In choosing between candidates who take conflicting positions with regard to fundamental moral truths, it is important to give greater weight to those issues that are more fundamental, that is, do not allow for differences in prudential judgment.

Catholics in general, and Catholic politicians in particular, have a responsibility to shape law and policy so as to respect the natural moral law. This law, written in the human heart, is not particular to the Catholic Church but accessible to all persons through right reason.

Because of sin we do not live in a perfect moral world. At times the best we can do is limit some evil. In those instances it is permissible to support legislation which restricts the evil. However, such support is always given with the determination to overcome the sinful situation.

When we are not dealing with fundamental and universal moral truths, but rather with strategies for the protection of human rights, or policies to promote social justice or competing initiatives to secure peace, there is room for differing prudential judgment.

Catholic officials, regardless of political affiliation, who openly support the taking of innocent human life in abortion, euthanasia or the destruction of human embryos, or the re-definition of marriage beyond one man and one woman, cannot call themselves practicing Catholics, and as such should not present themselves for the reception of Holy Communion. Moreover, citizens who want to promote this unjust taking of human life by their support of such candidates or measures share a proportional responsibility for these grave evils. The degree or extent of proportional responsibility will vary from situation to situation.

Come, Holy Spirit

When each of us was confirmed we received the gift of the Holy Spirit. How important it is for us to invoke the Holy Spirit and the special gifts the Spirit gives to us: wisdom about what is of ultimate importance, knowledge about the fundamental and universal human truths; understanding of their meaning; right judgment about their application in life; courage to abide by them even in the face of adversity; and a sense of awe and reverence before the divine sacredness that God imparts to human life.

In his stage play, Robert Bolt describes St. Thomas More as a "man for all seasons." His wisdom, knowledge and understanding about how to discern the respective claims of Caesar and God, and his courage in being faithful even at the cost of his own life, make him a patron of those who serve in public life. God grant us all the grace, in these challenging times, to have the wisdom and the courage to "render to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God."

New Orleans
September 22, 2004