

Archbishop Timothy M. Dolan's Sunday Homily

Twenty-Ninth Sunday in Ordinary Time

October 16, 2011

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Well, there you have it . . . literally, "Two sides of the same coin," as Jesus teaches us to "Render to Caesar what belongs to Caesar, but to God what belongs to God."

Jesus tackles a most neuralgic issue for a person of faith: *if* we believe God is the supreme governor of the universe, the definitive lawgiver -- as we indeed do; -- and, *if* we believe that, to borrow the words of St. Paul, "we have here no lasting city," but, rather, "have our true citizenship in heaven"; *if* we have given our allegiance to the One who told Pontius Pilate, "My kingdom is *not* of this world"; -- well, then, how does the person of faith approach what we might call our worldly, our temporal, our political, our civic duties?

Thorny moral question indeed. Jesus tells us, "Render to Caesar what belongs to Caesar, but to God what belongs to God"; and for 2000 years we, His followers, have been struggling to keep that delicate balance.

Jesus and His Church, of course, have always encouraged us to be "*in* the world but not *of* it," so, political responsibility, faithful citizenship, is a duty, a *virtue* . . .

For 2000 years we followers of Jesus have been trying to balance our duties to God and our duties to Caesar, to our government, longing for a society where the two orders are allied, not in conflict.

Our attempts these past two millennia have been awkward. At times we have erred on the side of our faith, believing that government owes religion certain privileges, power, dominion, even that government should *enforce* and *impose* a particular creed. This, of course, is *theocracy*; it is bad for the believer, bad for the Church, and bad for society, as we have learned the hard way.

At other times, we have erred on the side of attributing to the government a power and an authority reserved to God alone, reducing faith, religion, the Church, to a harassed, handcuffed hobby.

But, every once in awhile, we get it right, and the fragile balance between what we owe God and what we owe Caesar seems just right . . .

. . . and you and I, my brothers and sisters, are blessed to live in such a country!

As the revered Archbishop of our premier see of Baltimore, Cardinal James Gibbons, preached in a Rome still skeptical, in 1887, of American ideals such as religious liberty and distinctive spheres for Church and state . . .

For myself, as a citizen of the United States, without closing my eyes to our defects as a nation, I proclaim, with a deep sense of pride and gratitude, and

in this great capitol of Christendom, that I belong to a country where the civil government holds over us the aegis of its protection without interfering in the legitimate exercise of our sublime mission as ministers of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

The coin of this realm we call the United States of America has both our version of Caesar in the image of George Washington on one side, with the words, "In God we trust" on the other.

The charter of this land aspires to that balance of duties to God and Caesar, as Blessed Pope John Paul II noted on the mall in our nation's capital thirty-two years ago:

The Declaration of Independence solemnly attests to the equality of all human beings, endowed by their creator with certain inalienable rights . . . expressing a "firm reliance on the protection of divine providence." These are the sound moral principles formulated by your Founding Fathers . . . In the human and civil values that are contained in the spirit of this Declaration there are easily recognized strong connections with basic religious and Christian values . . .

While we praise God for the blessing of religious liberty and thank God for the privilege of citizenship in a nation which lists freedom of religion the first of all rights, *we cannot take it for granted!*

For once again the ginger balance is in peril!

In our volcanic world scene, we fear fanatics on the one side who pervert genuine faith into a billyclub of hate, violence, coercion and oppression, so that almost daily do we hear of church bombings, harassment, persecution, and even martyrdom, in frail religious minorities of lands afar.

And even here at home, in this Republic that we believe at last got it right, we see an *aggressive program* to mute the legitimate voice of religion in the public square; to reduce *freedom of religion* to just a *freedom to worship* on one's Sabbath, as long as that worship claims no normative value in helping define and protect the common good; and to dismiss the rights of conscience as unenlightened bigotry.

Go back to the mall with Blessed John Paul II, framed by the Capitol, the Supreme Court, the White House, the monuments to Washington, Jefferson, and Lincoln, and listen again to his wisdom in describing the *values* of America:

These values are strengthened: when power and authority are exercised in full respect for all the fundamental rights of the human person, whose dignity is the dignity of one created in the image and likeness of God; when freedom is accepted, not as an absolute end in itself, but as a gift that enables self-giving and service; when the family is protected and strengthened, when its unity is preserved, and when its role as a basic cell of society is recognized and honored. Human-Christian values triumph when any system is reformed that authorized

the exploitation of any human being; when upright service and honesty in public servants is promoted; when the dispensing of justice is fair and the same for all; when responsible use is made of the material and energy resources of the world -- resources that are meant for the benefit of all; when the environment is preserved intact for the future generations. Human-Christian values triumph by subjecting political and economic considerations to human dignity, by making them service the cause of every life created by God.

"Render to Caesar what belongs to Caesar, but to God what belongs to God."

. . . like most teachings of Jesus, easier said than done.