

A Gospel reading that is often used prior to election seasons comes from Matthew 22:15-21. It is the passage about rendering to Caesar those things that belong to Caesar and to God the things that belong to God. In that passage, there is the portrayal of strange bedfellows working together against Jesus. On the one side are the Herodians who saw Jesus as a political troublemaker. On the other side, are the Pharisees who saw Jesus as a heretic and blasphemer. What they have in common is that they saw Jesus as a threat. So, when they ask Jesus the question about taxes they were interested in one thing: getting Jesus in trouble with the authorities. Jesus saw through their ploy, but instead of ignoring or humiliating them, he teaches them (as us) a lesson. Give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar, and to God what belongs to God.

Every Christian holds dual citizenship, each one of which has its own benefits and also its corresponding duties. Our birth makes us citizens of an earthly nation; but our baptism makes us citizens of a heavenly Kingdom. Sometimes they overlap and sometimes they collide. In the end, however, our earthly citizenship will finish while our heavenly citizenship will last forever. It's obvious which one is more important.

Through the centuries, the many Christian saints and martyrs have taught us that if we are ever forced to choose between the two, we must be faithful first to our true and everlasting homeland, even if it means suffering painful consequences here on earth.

St Thomas Moore provides a powerful example for us. St. Thomas was the Lord Chancellor for King Henry VIII. When King Henry had the Parliament of England pass the Acts of Succession and Supremacy, which declared King Henry as head of the Church of England and denied the Pope's authority, Moore could not support the legislation. As a result, he was tried for treason, found guilty and beheaded. While he did not seek death, he refused to avoid it rather than deny the convictions of his faith. In other words, he placed God before Caesar.

This well known passage from the Gospel of Matthew reminds us that, as far as possible, we need to live out both of these citizenships responsibly. How can we do that? By embodying the virtue of Christian hope in the here and now. That is what St. Thomas Moore did.

In his second Encyclical Letter, *Spe Salvi*, Pope Benedict XVI made the point that both citizenships are important, but that our Christian citizenship is more important. He noted that we do not live only for the future. We belong to a new society of faith that "anticipates" the course of our pilgrimage. "Hence, while we must always be committed to the improvement of the world, tomorrow's better world cannot be the proper and sufficient content of our hope" (*Spe Salvi*, #4, #30). While we live in hope now, the fulfillment of our hope is not in this world but in heaven.

So, what are the duties of heavenly citizenship? What exactly belongs to God? All that we are, all that we possess, and all that we can hope for! Just as the Roman coin bore the image of the Emperor who made it, so the human soul bears the "image and likeness" of God (Genesis 1:26), our Creator and our Father. God calls each one of us into existence; and God wants each of us to exist, so that we can enter into and develop a personal relationship with him within the communion of saints. This is the whole purpose of human existence: to live in communion with God, starting now and leading into everlasting life. To paraphrase the Catechism (#44): "Coming from God, going toward God, men and women live a fully human life only if they freely live by their bond with God." Freely living by our bond with God means living as God created us to live. And God has shown us how to do this by sending us his only begotten Son, the model of every Christian life.

And so, a most basic way, giving to God what belongs to God means obeying his commandments, following the example of Christ, our Savior and Teacher, and heeding the teachings of his Church. Because we do not live in a vacuum but in a particular culture and society, there is a context in which we concretely live our faith.

Staying informed about important current issues is an important part of our Christian duty, but only a part of our duty. As Christians, we are called not only to help maintain civil society, but also to help improve it, to help build up a civilization of Christian justice and love. It is how we express Christian hope. In a democratic society, we have a unique opportunity to do this by making good use of the many conversations that happen in an election year - conversations about social virtues and Catholic values.

I believe that most voters want to make the right decision in the voting booth but that many voters likewise do not understand the difference between foundational and secondary issues. Voters are hungry for the truth on these complicated issues.

There is no short cut to studying and praying through the issues. As St. Thomas Moore said often to his children, "We cannot go to heaven in featherbeds." As you study and pray about the issues and discuss them with family and friends, co-workers and colleagues, it is important to keep fundamental principles in mind.

The most fundamental principle is that of the dignity of the human person and the sacredness of every human life from conception to death. Without life, principles are pointless. As John Paul II once wrote, "The right to health, to home, to work, to family, to culture – is false and illusory if the right to life, the most basic and fundamental right and the condition for all other personal rights, is not defended with maximum determination (*Christifideles Laici*, #38). At the same time, we cannot ignore or dismiss other serious threats to human life.

Racism, the use of the death penalty, resorting to pre-emptive strikes against other nations, the use of torture, the failure to respond to the millions without adequate shelter, food or access to health care or unjust immigration policies are likewise serious moral issues that demand for us to act in some way.

While all of these are matters about human dignity and the sacredness of life, they are not morally equivalent. At the same time, none of these issues may be ignored as being unimportant. All are matters for the voter to consider in forming conscience.

Preparing to vote and then actually taking the time to exercise this responsibility is a key way to help form society. But there is another way to share our Catholic values with others. Sociological studies have repeatedly shown that the single biggest influence on how people vote is not the mass media, but the input and advice they get from friends and colleagues. We should never be afraid to explain our point of view and the Church's teachings in conversations. It is a way to introduce Jesus into our conversations. In a very real sense, we can be a messenger of God; we have something important- something crucial - to contribute to these conversations! As the great Anglican political thinker Edmund Burke once said, "All it takes for evil to triumph is for good men to do nothing."

In today's largely democratic world, where good and evil are still fighting it out, it is important that we do something. It is true that none of us can do everything to right wrongs in the world. It is also true that every one of us can do something to right a wrong.

As we prepare for the final stages of the upcoming election, let us give to God what belongs to God (and nothing less); and let us give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar (and nothing more).