

Rev. Kevin Madigan
Our Lady of Good Counsel, NYC,
October 18, 2020 Streaming Mass
29th Sunday of Year A Mt 22:15-21

In today's Gospel we see there is no escape from political debate, and politics' entanglement with religion, neither in the time of Jesus nor in our own day. And, then as now, we see how politicians can make strange bedfellows. Here are two groups who were usually at each other's throats, the Pharisees and the Herodians, joining forces to eliminate Jesus whom they each perceive as a threat, albeit for different reasons. They question him with the hope of obtaining some damaging quote ("sound bite") that they can bring back to their respective constituencies, and thereby discredit Him. It seems that whatever way Jesus responds to the question asked of Him, He is bound to alienate one group or the other. If He says, "pay it," He will lose his following among the common people who resent paying their hard earned money to their conqueror, Rome. If he says, "don't pay it," He runs the risk of being suspected by the Roman governor as a revolutionary, and therefore likely to be disposed of very quickly.

The flattery of both groups directed toward Jesus, the excessiveness of their praise, and coming from such unexpected sources, reveals the hypocrisy that is at the heart of their question. Neither the Pharisees nor the Herodians are seeking wisdom or enlightenment. It is all a trap, to set Jesus up, then to move in for the kill. Jesus sees through their deceit and answers in a way that leaves them scratching their heads, how did He get out of that one.

We can see a hint of sarcasm at work, or, perhaps better, a wry sense of humor on the part of Jesus, that still manages to come through after 2000 years. Jesus asks His very "pious" questioners to hand Him one of the coins used in paying the obligatory tax—a coin they used daily, and that they were obviously carrying around with them. Jesus points out that on the face of the coin is the image of Caesar, with the inscription, "Emperor Tiberius, august son of the divine Augustus." Here are these supposedly pious, observant Jews, whose religion strictly forbade them to make any image of their own God, here they are carrying around coins proclaiming the emperor as "God." Jesus addresses Himself not just to their question, but to their hypocrisy. He knows that they do not mean what they say, so He forces them to show their hands, quite literally. And, in the process, the would-be trappers are themselves trapped.

The response of Jesus is that the emperor has the right to receive what is his due. And that debt is discharged by paying the required census tax, and in general, by fulfilling the duties required by the State—Jesus is no revolutionary. But Jesus goes

beyond the question that had been asked of Him. He puts the emphasis on rendering to God the things that are God's; that what matters most is to place oneself entirely at God's disposal. The State, insofar as it promotes law and order, and provides for the welfare of all its citizenry, is to be respected, supported and obeyed. But the State can make no total or ultimate claim upon us; God is owed our ultimate allegiance.

Jesus, in His response, does not make matters simple by defining precisely what are the things of Caesar and what are the things of God. It would be totally to miss the point to presume that life can be divided into two distinct spheres—one temporal and the other spiritual—with the boundaries never overlapping, with conflict never occurring between the two, as if politics were a matter of the public arena, and religion solely a private matter, an affair of the heart. One thing is clear. The image of a temporal Caesar may appear on the coin of the realm, but the image of God is stamped on the soul of every human being, created in God's likeness. Wherever and whenever that image in any human being is degraded or threatened or destroyed, then God's rule is opposed, God is not being rendered what is God's due. He or she does God's will in the political arena who promotes the dignity of all God's children.

Now let's jump ahead 2,000 years and ask a question that is equally explosive in our day, "Is it permissible for a Catholic to vote for a candidate who is pro-choice?" Catholic social teaching has consistently demanded that there be legal protection for the unborn, as they are the most vulnerable and victimized of humanity. At the same time, decisions on climate change in the next four years will either irrevocably amplify or arrest our world's trajectory toward climate annihilation and the possible ending of all life on this planet. Additionally, a failure to address our historic national legacies of racism and ethnic prejudice will further destroy the unity that is necessary for our social, cultural and political systems to flourish effectively and justly. How should a Catholic voter evaluate the claims put forth by many Catholic leaders that Catholic teaching demands that abortion, **or** climate, **or** rejecting racism is singularly determinative for faithful voting in the election of 2020?

Pope Francis has called us to frame the defense of human life and dignity in expansive terms and on many issues. He says, "Our defense of the innocent unborn needs to be clear, firm and passionate, for at stake is the dignity of a human life, which is always sacred and demands love for each person, regardless of his or her stage of development. Equally sacred are the lives of the poor, those already born, the destitute, the abandoned and the underprivileged, the vulnerable infirm and elderly exposed to covert euthanasia, the victims of human trafficking, new forms of slavery and every form of rejection."

It bears to faith-filled Catholics in his or her own conscience to bring Catholic social teaching in its entirety to weigh in on their voting choices, to ask deeply and without partisanship or self-interest what opportunities to advance the common good are available in 2020, and which candidate will best advance the common good. There is no single issue that in Catholic social teaching constitutes a magic bullet that determines a unitary option for faith-filled voting in 2020. The faithful Catholic is automatically homeless in our political world, never feeling at peace with the specific positions that their party has chosen to accept. For every voter, political choice is a matter of satisfaction and regret.

To return now to the question I posed a few minutes ago "Can a Catholic vote for a candidate who is pro-choice," I think the words of Judge Amy Coney Barrett can be helpful. In a speech she gave some years ago at Notre Dame she said it was important to recognize the emotional and physical difficulty of carrying an unwanted pregnancy to term. "Motherhood is a privilege, but it comes at a price," she said. "A woman who wants to become pregnant accepts this price, but in an unplanned pregnancy the woman faces the difficulties of pregnancy unwillingly." She went on to say how many women who choose to abort an unwanted pregnancy are both poor and single, and therefore do not have the means to raise a child properly. She said this ought to be an area of focus for addressing the abortion issue. She concluded, "I think supporting poor, single mothers would be the best way to reduce the number of abortions in the U.S." One factor for us to consider in making a conscientious choice as to whom to vote for might be to consider which candidate is more likely to enact measures that would provide the supportive environment for women contemplating an abortion.

When it comes time to deciding how to vote, one thing we all have to remember is that the coming of the Kingdom of God is not to be identified with any one political party or candidate. We always have to settle for what we believe is the best overall package we can get. Let us pray that our conscientious choice of a candidate be determined, first and foremost, by a concern for the image of God stamped on every human being.