

Item #3

God and Caesar

(This item appeared in substance in “The Homiletic and Pastoral Review” for November 20, 2013 (<http://www.hprweb.com/>). It is here presented in modified form with reference to an article, “Lincoln Lost, Douglas Won”, from *First Things*, January, 2019, pp 14-15, with comments by Fr. James Swetnam, S.J.)

Mark 12:13-17: 13 And they sent to him some of the Pharisees and some of the Herodians, to entrap him in his talk. 14 And they came and said to him, “Teacher, we know that you are true, and care for no man; for you do not regard the position of men, but truly teach the position of God. Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar or not?” 15 But knowing their hypocrisy, he said to them, “Why put me to the test? Bring me a coin and let me look at it”. 16 And they brought one. And he said to them, “Whose likeness and inscription is this?” They said to him, “Caesar’s”. 17 Jesus said to them, “Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s”. And they were amazed at him. (The Ignatius Catholic Study Bible, Revised Standard Version, Second Catholic Edition)

This story has as its basic lesson not that our religious life and our civil life are two completely separate areas, each with its own proper rules of conduct, but that our civil life is a legitimate part of our religious life. The two are related, but different.

In the Catholic view the religious sphere is based on the virtue of faith. This faith is a gift of God. Faith is completely gratuitous, absolutely unmerited. (But, of course, once it has been freely given to us by God we can use it as a basis of meriting. Thus our "merit" is a personal merit only relatively speaking.) Faith can be prepared for by experience but is independent of experience. It is not unreasonable, but it gives us truths which are beyond the scope of reason to arrive at or understand. It is faith aided by reason. Its rules come from Christ either directly or indirectly. As Catholics we cannot impose our faith on anyone. It is a free gift of God, to be accepted or rejected freely by the one on whom it has been bestowed. Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, § 160.

In the Catholic view the civil sphere is based on experience illumined by faith. That is to say, it is experience aided by faith. It contains rules of action which can be arrived at by reason alone, although this arrival can be aided considerably by faith. These rules sometimes go under the name of "Natural Law". As stated above, this civil sphere is not an area completely separated from the religious sphere. Rather it should be viewed as a legitimate part of our life of faith.

Because this civil sphere is based on experience, its rules can be arrived at by experience without the aid of faith. Thus the Natural Law can be a source of conduct which Catholics share with non-Catholics both Christian and non-Christian.

Some politicians in the United States claim authority over this civil sphere to the exclusion of the claims of faith. Their strategy seems to be to push the Church and other believers as believers as well) out of

the civil sphere and back into the sphere of faith, a sphere which is then called the sphere of "worship". That is to say, persons of faith as such are to be excluded from the "public square". The thinking behind such policy seems to be that faith is a purely subjective reality, independent of reason; the objects of faith may well be true, but they are not demonstrably true, and hence may not serve as a basis of norms of action to be imposed on persons who do not share this faith.

This view, of course, runs counter to the view expressed above that the civil sphere is based on reason whether illumined by faith or not. Its principles are more easily arrived at when faith is part of the process, but faith is not absolutely necessary. That is to say, the principles of the Natural Law are based on experience and can be arrived at by reason alone. (This does not mean, of course, that there can be no differences of opinion about what these principles are. But it does mean that the principles are open to reasonable debate by all, independent of the presence or not of faith in their lives.)

Thus it is false to claim that the secular State in a democracy may or should have a monopoly on rules of conduct in the civil sphere any more than that in a democracy the world of faith may or should have a monopoly on rules of conduct in the civil sphere. The civil sphere is open to participants with or without faith. The only required condition would seem to be a respect for reason and for what reason stands for: the dignity of the human person.

Given the above as preamble, the following considerations present what the Catholic Church considers the fundamental, permanent principles of her social teaching,

i.e., the basis for her involvement in the civil order. They are based on the experience of countless generations living the life of Catholic faith. They are to be found outlined in detail in the Vatican document, "The Compendium of the Social Teaching of the Church", Chapter 4 (§§ 160-208). These principles are:

- 1) The Dignity of the Human Person (foundation).
- 2) The Common Good.
- 3) Subsidiarity.
- 4) Solidarity.

These principles are so general and so fundamental that they concern the reality of any society. That is to say, "from close and immediate relationships to those mediated by politics, economics and law; from relationships among communities and groups to relations between peoples and nations" (§ 161).

1) The Dignity of the Human Person. Every human person is by the very fact of his or her personhood, a being able to know and to choose. (These characteristics, of course, can be impeded by accidental circumstances of a great variety.) As such, each person is responsible for his or her actions, i.e., they are free. This responsibility can be temporarily or permanently limited, and even when present is subject to the laws of more or less (i.e., virtue or vice in various degrees). But it is the basis for all activity that is truly human and hence of all civilized society. Even when a person is not able to act in a responsible way due to accidental limitations (e.g., presence in the womb before birth, mental handicaps, serious injury) that person still must be treated in a civilized way, the same way that person would be obliged to treat himself or herself or other people if the accidental limitations were not present.

2) **The Common Good.** The common good can be defined as "the sum total of social conditions which allow people, either as groups or as individuals, to reach their fulfillment more fully and more easily" (§ 164). The common good "does not consist in the simple sum of the particular goods of each subject of a social entity. Belonging to everyone and to each person, it is and remains 'common', because it is indivisible and because only together is it possible to attain it, increase it and safeguard its effectiveness with regard also to the future". The common good, in fact, can be understood as the social and community dimension of the moral good.

3) **Subsidiarity.** "Just as it is gravely wrong to take from individuals what they can accomplish by their own initiative and industry and give it to the community, so also it is an injustice and at the same time a grave evil and disturbance of right order to assign to a greater and higher association what lesser and subordinate organizations can do. For every social activity ought of its very nature to furnish help to the members of the body social, and never destroy and absorb them" (§ 186). "Experience shows that the denial of subsidiarity, or its limitation in the name of an alleged democratization or equality of all members of society, limits and sometimes even destroys the spirit of freedom and initiative" (§ 187).

4) **Solidarity.** "Solidarity highlights in a particular way the intrinsic social nature of the human person, the equality of all in dignity and rights and the common path of individuals and peoples towards an ever more committed unity." Solidarity is a "firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good.

That is to say, to the good of all and of each individual, because we are all really responsible for all" (§ 193).

It should be noted that while these three principles of the Common Good, Subsidiarity, and Solidarity and their foundation in the Dignity of the Human Person are parts of the Gospel message, rightly understood in the implications of the Good News, in themselves they are accessible to human reason alone without the aid of faith. The result is that they are not, as such, part of the deposit of faith, accessible only to those who have received the gift of faith, but accessible (though perhaps not as easily) to all those of good will who use their experience as the basis for rational judgment. It would be wrong, therefore, to claim that these four elements are limited to the sphere of Catholic faith, even though they may be advanced by the Catholic Church and are applicable to the Catholic Church. **THEY ARE RELEVANT TO EVERY SOCIETY, WHETHER THAT SOCIETY IS BASED ON FAITH OR NOT, AND NO MATTER THE SOURCE WHICH ADVANCES THEM. FOR THEY ARE INTRINSIC TO THE WELL-BEING OF SOCIETY AS SUCH. ACCORDINGLY, THEY ARE APPROPRIATE FOR THE AREA OF THE PUBLIC SQUARE AND ARE TO BE JUDGED ON THEIR INTRINSIC MERIT, AND NOT ON THE SOURCE OR SOURCES FROM WHICH THEY CAME. HENCE, NO ONE "OWNS" THE PUBLIC SQUARE, NEITHER THE CHURCH NOR THE STATE NOR ANY OTHER ORGANIZATION. EACH PERSON AND EACH ORGANIZED GROUP OF PERSONS HAS THE RIGHT TO BE PRESENT IN THIS PUBLIC SQUARE PROVIDED THAT THEY RECOGNIZE THE PRIMACY OF REASON IN THE DISCUSSIONS PROPER TO THE PUBLIC SQUARE. GOD CREATED BOTH THE**

DOMAIN OF FAITH AND THE DOMAIN OF REASON. REASON OPERATES IN BOTH DOMAINS, BUT IN DIFFERENT WAYS. BUT IT IS NOT NECESSARY TO RECOGNIZE THAT THE PUBLIC SQUARE IS GOD'S DOMAIN IN ORDER THAT GOD'S REASON BE EMPLOYED IN IT.

In addition to the above foundation and principles there are three values and a conclusion needed to complete what seem to be necessary for the fully successful functioning of any society:

- 1) truth;
- 2) freedom;
- 3) justice;
- 4) love (culmination).

"Truth" is not power. It is what actually is in relation to the human mind. Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (§ 2500).

"Freedom" is the absence of any form of coercion, so that the human person can act with the will on the basis of the intellect's grasp of truth. Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (§ 1731).

"Justice" is the firm will to give what is due to God and neighbor. Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (§ 1807).

All of the above should culminate in a society marked by "love", that is, the giving of self. Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (§ 1889).

To return to Mark 12:13-17. The problems of the relations between Church and State are complex, and not all can be solved on the basis of the analysis given above. But the analysis given above is consistent with

Mark 12:13-17: "Jesus held that the claims of God are all-embracing (cf. Mark 12:29-30), but he does recognize that obligations due to the State are "within the divine order" (Vincent Taylor, a recognized Protestant Markan scholar).

Catechism of the Catholic Church (§§ 1877-1948).

To quote from the article in *First Things* mentioned at the beginning of this item:

The purpose of democracy, as Douglas understood it, is to be an end in itself, and whatever a democratic majority decides to sanction must stand as law. (Or, as Justice Holmes put it: "If my fellow citizens want to go to hell I will help them. It's my job.") Lincoln, however, understood democracy as a means—a good, natural and just means—but only a means toward helping a republic achieve the good that is embodied in natural law.



