Homily for the 29th Sunday in Ordinary Time 2026 Year A

Christ's famous injunction, ‘Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God's’, not only shows how quick witted He was to avoid falling into the trap set for Him, but also point to a certain irreconcilability between what has been termed the sacred and the secular.

Yet is that simple aphorism true? If God is Creator and sustainer of all, can anything be outside His domain?

A more accurate version might be, ‘God first, and then everything else in its proper place’.

Right from the early Church that tension or opposition between the Church and the State has always existed. The early Christian martyrs were killed because they were seen as enemies of the State, the Roman Empire. Within 400 years, that was completely reversed with the conversion of the emperor Constantine when Christianity, as it was then, became the official religion of the State. You could not hold any office or post of authority unless you were a Christian.

But there was a heavy price to pay. If you look at the Church’s history right throughout the Middle Ages the Church extended enormous authority and influence in the secular and what went with it resulted in a sort of corruption of its spiritual identity and role and a loss of its vision. Great things were done, but terrible things were done as well.

Popes, cardinals, bishops, and priests became in all but name kings, princes, and vast landowners. They ran and maintained armies to fight against each other to extend and secure the material wealth of the Church. The Sacred swallowed up the Secular until a point was reached when enough was enough and Secular powers and leaders saw the Church no longer as the instrument of God, but an enemy to be resisted. They began to claw back the ground usurped by the Church.

By the 16th century the Church itself began to fragment, until by the 18th Century, and the time of the French revolution, the State began to claw back its powers and see the Church as its enemy, and violently opened up a chasm between Church and State, the Sacred and the Secular, even to the point of its destruction. Today, in some countries, history has turned full circle and to be a Christian means persecution, imprisonment and even death.

Due to the abiding presence of the Holy Spirit, the Church has survived, but it has been a long and painful process of purification for it to recapture the purity of Christ's vision and its role in the history of Salvation.

What is that role? Can the Sacred and the Secular complement each other and not be seen as enemies?

The primary Christian precept is to love God and our neighbour. If it is to mean more than just vague benevolence it must involve a concern not only for their spiritual condition but for their human condition; how they live, their well-being, their freedom, their house, their job, and their prosperity or poverty. All this is the field of politics, and therefore is part of our double commitment to God and our neighbour. Religion and politics need to be allies and not rivals.

All healthy partnerships are based upon mutual respect and can curb the excesses of each other. Unchecked religion can degenerate into blind fundamentalism, whilst unchecked politics can lose sight of the common good and degenerate into totalitarianism.

Faith and Secular reason need each other and should not be afraid to enter into a profound and ongoing dialogue for the good of our civilization.

When a relationship is healthy there is respect and not fear. Then religion can be seen not as a problem to be solved, but as a leaven, a vital contributor to the national conversation.

But the problem today is that the Church and the Christian must live in a pluralistic society, where the government or the State has to legislate in complex issues for the common good, or what it perceives to be the common good.

Whilst the principles in the Gospels enunciated by Christ are clear and unambiguous their application in particular circumstances are not so straightforward anymore and a conscientious Christian may often find that the head and the heart are pulled in opposite directions.

What is one to do?

The new Catechism of the Catholic Church teaches us that 'The citizen is obliged in conscience not to follow the directives of civil authorities when they are contrary to the

demands of the moral order, to the fundamental rights of persons, or the teachings of the Gospel'.

Refusing obedience to civil authorities when their demands are contrary to those of an upright conscience finds its justification in the distinction between serving God and serving the political community. 'Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's', tells us we must obey God rather than men.

Painful modern examples are governments who legislate in favour of abortion and euthanasia. The Christian often must live in a society whose principles and beliefs are radically different to theirs.

The question persists though, 'What is one to do'?

The broadest answer, and it is not the simplest answer, is the obligation to Christ or Christ like behaviour in all circumstances. No matter how deeply they hold their convictions or how warmly they espouse their causes, they must never resort to violence, and that includes intimidation in all of its forms.

Muscular crusades, whether modern or mediaeval, can cause irreparable harm. Look for example at the fire-bombings and shootings of staff in abortion clinics by members of the extreme right moral majority in the United states. That is not the work of Christ. The end never justifies the means. Our only resort is persuasion, and the State has to take cognisance of this. Persuasion is always a gentle and reasonable art.

In a pluralistic society we persuade by living our Christian lives to the full. A pluralistic society will always present a challenge to us, and the depth of our convictions will determine how we survive in that society, and how we change, improve, and enrich that society. But it is a long haul, and it is in God's own good time.

It may help to remember two things.

The Old Testament tells us that 'The anger of man works not the Justice of God'.

And, as the great English Saint, Saint Thomas More said before his execution, 'I am always the king's good servant but God's first'.

To paraphrase, 'Render always first to God the things that are God's and then to Caesar what is Caesar's'.