

CHURCH AND STATE 2012

“I am the king’s good servant, but God’s first.” This statement by St. Thomas More may be an appropriate expression of how we Catholics look at our relationship with civil authority. We want to be a part of the Representative Republic, but always measured against a standard of discipleship to Jesus Christ. Catholics are generally patriotic, loving the country of their birth or citizenship, and yet there is a tension, a realization that “our true citizenship is in heaven”¹ so how we relate to worldly institutions and authority is guided by principles not always accepted by the state or the popular culture.

It is once again “election season”: the California primary is Tuesday, June 5, and national election is Tuesday, November 6. While various candidates vie for your attention and vote for the offices of president, congress, state and local offices, and for state propositions, it’s important that we Catholics approach all this mess armed with the teachings of our faith and mindful that we *must* evangelize our nation and culture by acting on our beliefs, and insisting that what we “teach, believe, and profess to be revealed by God”² is in fact the best way for our nation to repair itself and thrive. “Catholics have the same rights and duties as others to participate fully in public life. The Church throughout its institutions must be free to carry out its mission and contribute to the common good without being pressured to sacrifice fundamental teachings and moral principles.”³ It’s not “imposing our morality” as some say, but rather insisting that our moral teachings are from “nature and nature’s God,”⁴ as even our Constitution acknowledges the role of morality and conscience in civic life. We have “inalienable rights,”⁵ meaning rights that no one can take away from us; rights not given by the state but endowed on us by our Creator. Whatever rights are ours by the authority of the government are rights that can be changed or taken away, but our human rights given us by God are not in the hands of the government to do with as they please.

Sometimes our politicians forget this. Henry VIII thought that he could assume to himself authority over the Catholic Church in England so that he could divorce and remarry as he wished. His 1534 Act of Supremacy made himself the final decider of what religion would teach, and almost all of the Catholic bishops of the time signed the Act, and by doing so officially abandoned the Catholic Church and started with King Henry the Church of England. St. Thomas More, the former Chancellor of Henry’s government and his close

¹ *Philippians* 3:20

² Profession of Faith for candidates being received into the Church, Rite of Christian Initiation n. 491

³ USCCB, *Faithful Citizenship*, 2012 “Introductory Note”

⁴ US *Declaration of Independence*, first sentence

⁵ *Ibid.*, Preamble

friend, together with Bishop John Fischer refused to sign the Act and were martyred for it. More's statement "I am the king's good servant, but God's first" was spoken moments before he was beheaded for treason.

Today Catholics are concerned about the erosion of religious freedom, and we oppose any assumed rights that the government tries to impose over the Church. The government's new health care mandate has created a situation in which the Catholic Church would be forced to compromise its long-standing teachings and pay for insurance coverage for contraception, sterilization procedures, and drugs that will cause abortions. Many people of different faiths, many other Christian churches, and many people of *no* faith are also worried about the precedent this sets of telling churches what to do, and of granting no conscience waivers for people who believe differently from the mainstream. Why would so many outside the Church add their voices to ours over what appears to be a "Catholic issue" like contraception? Because it's not just about that, it's more about the erosion of religious freedom. The growing voices of opposition remind me of the famous quote by the Protestant Pastor Martin Niemoller in 1946: "First they came for the Communists, but I was not a Communist so I did not speak out. Then they came for the Socialists and the Trade Unionists, but I was neither, so I did not speak out. Then they came for the Jews, but I was not a Jew so I did not speak out. And when they came for me, there was no one left to speak out for me." Other churches and civic leaders know that it may start here, on seemingly an issue no one but celibate clerics care about, but it won't end here.

There has been a subtle shift in civic discourse that speaks no longer of "freedom of *religion*," but rather "freedom of *worship*": this narrows the Church's influence only to what we do within these church walls, and seeks to silence our voice in the public square where our religion may no longer be free to exercise its rights through institutions of education, health care, and charity. It's too early to tell where the current controversy will go, every week the issue seems to shift making anything I say today out-of-date next week, but "many Catholics are confused and angry. They should be. Many feel betrayed" by an administration that 54% of Catholics in this country voted into office three years ago, and now wonder why it "would seek to coerce Catholic employers, private [Catholic citizens as well as the Catholic Church], to violate their religious convictions."⁶ Over the past few years the federal government has allowed conscience waivers for conscientious objectors who don't want to fight in war, the 7th Day Adventists to not force them to work on Saturday, the Amish to not have insurance at all, and to Native Americans who use peyote as part of their religious rites even though it's an illegal hallucinogenic drug. Why so much latitude to others and not to Catholics? Because we're an easy target? We need to pray and fast for a positive outcome of this attack on our religious freedom, but we *must* use the power of our collective voice and vote to elect the

⁶ Archbishop Charles Chaput, Archdiocese of Philadelphia PA, philly.com, 02/12/2012 opinion

leadership that will respect the First Amendment, whether they respect Catholic beliefs or not.

After the Louisiana Purchase of 1804, Sister Marie Therese Farjon of the Ursuline Order of nuns wrote to President Thomas Jefferson “to ask whether the sisters’ property and ministries would be secure under the new government,” since Louisiana had been under French jurisdiction and was now part of the United States. In response, President Jefferson replied: “The principles of the Constitution and the government of the United States are a sure guarantee to you that it will be preserved to you sacred and inviolate and that your institution will be permitted to govern itself according to its own voluntary rules without interference from civil authorities.”⁷ Would Jefferson recognize the current controversy as anything similar to his promise?

That we Catholics believe that abortion and contraception are sinful is, as Jefferson put it, “voluntary rules.” Even though the current controversy regarding federal health care is primarily about freedom of religion and conscience, about respecting our “voluntary rules” that constitute the moral and doctrinal teachings of the Catholic Church, I feel a need to ask whether many *Catholics* respect our own beliefs! Perhaps it’s enough to fight against the Health and Human Services mandate on First Amendment grounds, but the only reason it’s a conscience issue is because the Church has always held artificial contraception to be a sin. In fact every Christian church used to believe this until 1930 when the Church of England thought it would be okay under certain circumstances to allow couples to use contraception, then Christian morality unraveled from there. Since then the world over has experienced 1) the general lowering of moral standards, 2) the rise in infidelity and children born out of wedlock, 3) the reduction of women to objects used to satisfy men, and 4) government coercion in reproductive matters. Pope Paul VI said this is *exactly* what would happen if contraception became the norm in his Encyclical Letter *Humane Vitae* in 1968.⁸ 50 years later his prophecy is undeniable, yet it hasn’t stopped most people—and most Catholics—from acting like contraception is no big deal. Time to wake up, Catholics. Those who dislike the Catholic Church point to the majority Catholics who don’t follow the Church’s teaching in this matter as a primary reason why the Church is wrong and why a federal mandate is perfectly okay to impose on the Church. The world thinks we’re a bunch of idiots who need to be forced to do what they think is best. Contraception and abortion are bad for the soul, bad for marriage, and bad medicine. Contraception is not preventative medicine: pregnancy is not a disease people have to be protected from. Sex is not a recreation and marriage is not the government’s to redefine.

⁷ Archbishop George Niederauer, Archdiocese of San Francisco, calcatholic.com, 03/01/2012

⁸ n. 17

The Church cannot tell people for whom to vote. We can't name names or endorse specific candidates. But the Church does hold the right to teach its members *how* to vote, what principles to consider as you exercise your precious American democratic privilege. We are morally obligated to bring our faith to the voting booth. I recommend you read the US Bishops' document *Faithful Citizenship*, which teaches the primary theme of the right to life and the dignity of every human person. "We cannot consider abortion... as merely [one issue] among many to be weighed or dismissed with a shrug. Nor can we exclude other issues that also are pro-life": poverty, immigration, war, capital punishment, etc.⁹ There is no moral equivalence between pro-life issues and other social issues.¹⁰ *Faithful Citizenship* outlines "clear obligations to oppose intrinsic evils which can never be justified...and other [issues] raising serious moral questions."¹¹ The challenge here is to think like a *Catholic*, not like a Democrat or a Republican who holds opposing views labeled "pro-life" or "social justice": Catholics must not act or vote as though these are in opposition. We must fight to end abortion, to protect the rights of the Church, and protect traditional marriage *first, and* work for solutions to all the other social ills of our time. "All issues do not carry the same moral weight and the moral obligation to oppose intrinsically evil acts has a special claim on our actions."¹² "Some issues involve principles that can never be violated... Others reflect our judgment about the best way to apply Catholic principles to policy issues."¹³ Certainly we cannot ignore serious issues like immigration, economic justice, poverty, and education: these are not optional concerns, but reasonable people can and do disagree on the nature of the problems and the best way to solve them.¹⁴

Trying to find political leaders who hold all the Church's concerns, in the same order that the Church holds them, may be impossible. So then it comes to a matter of choosing among candidates, sometimes choosing the lesser of two evils. But what is clear in Vatican and American Church documents is that there *is* a priority of issues, beginning with those of the gravest moral consequence. Choosing a candidate who has good ideas about other social problems but who is in favor of abortion is *not an acceptable use of your vote*: "The human outcry which is justly made on behalf of human rights 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."¹⁵ And worse, choosing a candidate precisely because he or she *is* pro-abortion is a mortal sin.¹⁶ A great cause of scandal are those in

⁹ Bishop David Zubic, Diocese of Pittsburgh, 02/02/2012 letter to Catholics

¹⁰ *FC* n. 28

¹¹ *FC* 2012 Introductory Note

¹² *FC* n. 37

¹³ *FC* n. 63

¹⁴ cf. *FC* n. 29

¹⁵ *FC* n. 26, quoting Bl. Pope John Paul II, *Christifidelis Laici* n. 38)

¹⁶ cf. *FC* n. 34

government leadership who call themselves Catholics but advocate for things that are so obviously contrary to the teachings of the Catholic Church. You are not required to vote for someone simply because he or she is Catholic, but vote for any candidate who will respect and promote what we Catholics believe to be the foundation of the common good. We're looking for people who will truly represent us Catholics, who make up 25% of the population in America. You have to know the candidates' records and positions on moral issues and choose wisely, allowing your Catholic faith to inform your vote. We "need to be guided more by our moral convictions than by our attachment to a political party or interest group."¹⁷

Jesus taught that "the children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light."¹⁸ We Christians are not that well organized or well funded in the fight for freedom of religion, freedom of conscience, and the rights of the Church to perform its mission of educating, healing, and serving the needy. No political party is concerned about a "Catholic voting bloc" because they know we are not united in a prioritized set of beliefs that inform our vote! As long as we remain confused and disorganized, those who oppose the Church will continue to chip away at the moral code that is the foundation of a healthy society. We Christians are supposed to be the "salt of the earth,"¹⁹ a preservative agent that upholds the "laws of nature and nature's God" and reminds our great nation of what God created us to be. We must not abandon the principles of our Republic enshrined in the *Constitution* and *Bill of Rights*. To paraphrase St. Thomas More, I am a proud American, proud to serve my nation in any way I can, but I am God's servant first.

¹⁷ FC n. 14

¹⁸ Luke 16:8

¹⁹ Matthew 5:13