

29A 2017 SML  
MT 22:15-21

Many would argue that the postwar era has seen huge success for Catholics as they finally arrived in the American mainstream after two hundred years of discrimination. Numbering 69 million today, Catholics make up nearly one-quarter of the total American population.

Economically and socially, Catholics have climbed out of the cultural ghetto and have solidly rooted themselves in the middle and upper middle classes. By some counts, more than 150 Catholics now serve in Congress, including a quarter of all US senators. Five of our US Supreme Court justices are Catholic.

Yet we can fairly ask: What difference has it made? What impact have these Catholic gains really had on American public life? We can point to many individual successes and examples of forceful Catholic witness. But American culture is not noticeably more ethical or upright. Nor can we argue that America's public square is more informed by the spirit of the Gospel.

Traces of our country's Christian origins remain visible. Americans are broadly a people of faith who value religion, fair

play, and common decency. Most Americans are generous and capable of great sacrifices for others, both at home and abroad. Americans have a genuine respect for human rights, freedom and the rule of law. Catholics share all these traits with their fellow citizens.

Yet there is another America; a kind of dark mirror image of our ideals and self-understanding. This is an America of ethnic and racial injustice, selfishness, consumer greed, and careerism, where popular culture grows increasingly brutal and vulgar. This is an America where:

- ✓ half of all marriages end in divorce, and many remarry
- ✓ where four of every ten children are born out of wedlock,
- ✓ roughly a million children are killed each year in the womb
- ✓ and millions are forgotten and left behind by poverty in this America.

Religion is increasingly belittled in the political conversation in this America, and the conversation itself has grown uncivil, indifferent, and unreasoned. Finally in this America, ordinary citizens show a growing cynicism about the future of our common life together. Stated simply, render to Caesar what is Caesar's, but do not render to God what is God's.

Again: What difference do Catholics really make?

American bishops have not lacked a civic voice. Since the 1970s and up to this recent threat to our religious freedom in mandating coverage for abortions, abortifacients and contraceptives in health care reform, our nation's bishops have offered their moral counsel on issues ranging from civil rights to abortion, to war and peace, to immigration and economic justice.

But the negative trends in American public life have continued, and more troubling still are indicators within the Church herself.

- ✓ One in five US parishes does not have a resident pastor;
- ✓ Mass attendance has dropped (the national average is 17%; I'm happy to report our average is 22%, but still that means 78% are not coming;
- ✓ and Catholics have left the Church, not for other religions, but for no religion at all.

Surveys routinely show that Catholics either do not know Catholic teachings or simply don't accept them. Catholics divorce and remarry, have abortions and cohabit at roughly the same rates as their neighbors. In a nutshell, a great many

Catholics keep the Catholic brand name, but they freelance what it means.

So in rendering to Caesar what is Caesar's AND to God what is God's, what are we, as Catholics, to do?

For every Catholic, every new beginning must start with a return to Jesus Christ, the Gospel, and the Church. The heart of renewal is pretty straightforward.

- ✓ Do we really believe that Jesus Christ is our Savior?
- ✓ Do we really believe that the Gospels are the Word of God?
- ✓ Do we really believe that the Catholic Church is the true mother Church that Christ Himself founded, and that She teaches in His name?

Many of us who call ourselves "Catholic" live as if we'd never really thought about any of these questions. In fact, by our actions, many of us witness a kind of practical atheism: paying lip service to God, but living as if He didn't really exist.

Renewal begins from the inside out, and that goes for individuals and for societies.

- ✓ That means, every day must begin with the words we hear on Ash Wednesday, "Repent and believe in the Gospel."
- ✓ That means accepting the truth that we need Jesus Christ in our lives.

- ✓ That means that His Gospel is the only way to live. That means that His Church is our mother and guide.
- ✓ That means that our interior acts of faith will always have external, public consequences.

Renewal means we have to take a good, hard look at how we live and proclaim our faith in this culture.

We also need to be clear about what separation of church and state really means, and what it doesn't mean. Separation of church and state means we do not want a Church run government, and we do not want a government run Church. Separation of church and state means freedom of religion, not freedom from religion.

- ✓ Not to be able to pray in the public square or in public school
- ✓ Not to be able to put a nativity scene in front of town hall
- ✓ Not to be able to put a cross on a roadside where a loved one was killed
- ✓ Not to be able to follow our conscience

were never the intentions of separation of church and state. Separation of church and state means we do not want a Church run government, and we do not want a government run Church. Render to Caesar what is Caesar's. Render to God what is God's.

As American Catholics, and notice, I did not say, Catholic Americans. As American Catholics, most of us have food to eat and work that puts cash in our pockets. We have money to support our churches, access to lawmakers, and talented, influential people in our communities. Our achievements and hard work give us a unique power to bear witness to the Gospel. But all too often, we face enormous counter pressures

- ✓ to stay silent;
- ✓ to compromise on matters of justice;
- ✓ to go along with fashionable opinion.

And this is just as true for bishops and clergy as it is for Catholics at every level of public life.

We can take a lesson from the early Church. The emperor Valens ruled the eastern half of the Roman Empire in the latter half of the fourth century. He was a brutal man at a time of bitter political and religious turmoil, and he sought to destroy the orthodox faith in Christ. St. Basil the Great, then bishop of Caesarea, confronted him face-to-face about his policies.

“Never has anyone dared to speak to me with such freedom,” Valens said. Basil replied, “Obviously you have never met a bishop before.”

This is how Christ calls bishops to lead: with candor, simplicity and courage. In every situation, men and women must know that they have “met a bishop.” Not a privileged dignitary, not a corporate executive; but a leader and teacher, a true apostle of Jesus Christ.

St. Gregory the Great asks all of us to pray for our priests.

He says:

Pray for us (priests) so that we may have the strength to work on your behalf, that our tongue may not grow weary of exhortation, and that after we have accepted the office of preaching, our silence may not condemn us before the just judge.

Similarly, people should come away from every encounter with every American Catholic knowing that they have met a true Catholic. What applies to Catholic leadership applies to Catholic lay people as well, and in some ways, more so. Renewal happens from the inside out. Priests are poor substitutes for the lay vocation when it comes to working in the public square. If the secular world is to be redeemed, it must happen from the inside out, which means the task belongs primary to faithful, well-informed, committed American Catholics, not Catholic Americans. That is what is meant by

rendering to Caesar what is Caesar's, but more importantly,  
rendering to God what is God's.