# RENDER UNTO CAESAR

SERVING THE NATION BY LIVING
OUR CATHOLIC BELIEFS
IN POLITICAL LIFE

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# 1.

## STARTING AT THE SOURCE

I WROTE THIS BOOK for two reasons. The first is simple. A friend asked me to do it.

My friend is a young attorney. In 2004, he ran for the Colorado General Assembly on the Democratic Party ticket. He did surprisingly well. He lost by a small margin in a heavily Republican district. But it was an odd experience. He was barely thirty and new to campaigning. His older opponent had an advantage as the incumbent. Worse, he was a political "blue," but running in traditionally red territory.

Even his own party saw him as a strange creature. My friend believed then and believes now that *Roe v. Wade* is bad law. Thus, he had trouble with some of his own Democratic colleagues from the day he chose to run. He found out how hard it is to raise money. He felt the same heavy pressure all candidates feel to adjust their principles to win support. What he discovered—like many others—is that being a faithful Catholic in political life

is often easier said than done. Some months after the election, he asked me to write down my thoughts about Catholics in public service to help people considering a political career. I agreed.

The irony, though, is this: A very good guide to Catholic citizenship and public leadership already exists. The pastoral statement *Living the Gospel of Life,* issued in 1998 by the U.S. Catholic bishops—though it had to survive a great deal of internal friction and wrangling first—remains, in my view, the best tool anywhere for understanding the American Catholic political vocation.[1] Catholics already know that politics exists to serve the common good. But what is the common good? It's a thorny question. Some problems are more complicated than others. Some issues have more gravity than others. Some methods to achieve a good end are wrong in themselves. We can never choose them without coarsening the society we inhabit.

Public officials have a special responsibility in sorting these things out. This is why the health of our public life requires men and women of strong moral character in political service. No community understands this better than the Catholic Church, from centuries of both good and ugly experience. The genius of Pope John Paul II's great 1995 encyclical, *Evangelium Vitae* (The Gospel of Life), is not that it gives us a specific, sectarian blueprint for building a moral society. It doesn't. Rather, it offers

a common architecture for humane political thought and boundaries for government action that cannot be crossed without brutalizing human dignity. When the U.S. bishops issued *Living the Gospel of Life,* they applied the best of John Paul's encyclical to the American experience. Not surprisingly, no other document ever issued by the American bishops on political responsibility has the clarity, coherence, and force of *Living the Gospel of Life.* The only sadness is that so few Catholics seem to know about it. In fact, if this book does nothing more than lead more people to read and act on *Living the Gospel of Life,* it will have partly served its purpose.

The second reason for this book is more personal. Like many other pastors, I deal with the human problems that drive public policy every day: homelessness, poverty, abortion, immigration, and a dozen other issues. No one addresses these problems more directly or effectively than the Catholic Church and other religious communities. Over the past decade I've grown increasingly tired of the church and her people being told to be quiet on public issues that urgently concern us. Worse, Catholics themselves too often stay silent out of a misguided sense of good manners. Even those of us who are bishops can sometimes seem more concerned with discretion and diplomacy than speaking plainly and acting clearly. Do not misunderstand me. Discretion and diplomacy are essential skills—but not if they lead to a habit of self-

censorship. Self-censorship is an even bigger mistake than allowing ourselves to be lectured by people with little sympathy for our beliefs.

Let me explain what this book will *not* do. It will not endorse any political party or candidate. Both major U.S. political parties have plenty of good people in their ranks. Neither party fully represents a Catholic way of thinking about social issues. One of the lessons we need to learn from the last fifty years is that a preferred American "Catholic" party doesn't exist. The sooner Catholics feel at home in *any* political party, the sooner that party begins to take them for granted and then to ignore their concerns. Party loyalty is a dead end. It's a lethal form of laziness. Issues matter. Character matters. Acting on principle matters. The sound bite and the slogan do not matter. They belong to a vocabulary of the herd, and human beings deserve better. Real freedom demands an ability to think, and a great deal of modern life seems deliberately designed to discourage that.

This book will not feed anyone's nostalgia for a Catholic golden age. The past usually looks better as it fades in the rearview mirror. Art Buchwald once said that if you like nostalgia, pretend today is yesterday and then go out and have a great time. I agree. After listening to some ten thousand personal confessions over thirty-seven years of priesthood, I'm very confident that the details of daily life change over time, but human nature doesn't. We've seen better and worse times to be Catholic in the

United States than the present. But today is the time in which we need to work.

This book will not be an academic study or a work of formal scholarship. I've included endnotes where I believe them to be useful or necessary, but they are not exhaustive. On the other hand, this book certainly *does* claim to be a statement of common sense amply supported by history, public record, and fact. Readers will also notice that I reference Joseph Ratzinger in various ways throughout this book, but not because of his election in 2005 as Pope Benedict XVI. At least, this is not the main reason. In fact, popes serve, contribute, fade like everyone else and recede into the memory of the church. People usually assume that popes, and all pastors, have far more "power" over events than they actually do.

As successor of Peter, Joseph Ratzinger is a pastor for all Catholics, including American Catholics. But equally important, the course of his life and the development of his thought—as an author, intellectual, and teacher; from his time as a seminarian in the Third Reich, to young theologian, to bishop, to cardinal, to confidant and close adviser to John Paul II, to his own election as pope—offer a unique window on the course of Catholic life in the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. He belongs to an extraordinary generation of Catholic leaders who lived through war and genocide, remained faithful to Jesus Christ, never lost their love for the church, and struggled hard to renew her mission to the world; a

generation we should learn from and which, when it passes, will not come again.

Finally, this book doesn't offer any grand theory. It does offer thoughts based on my nineteen years as an American Catholic bishop and my interest in our common history. I believe that our nation's public life, like Christianity itself, is meant for everyone, and everyone has a duty to contribute to it. The American experiment depends on the active involvement of all its citizens, not just lobbyists, experts, think tanks, and the mass media. For Catholics, politics—the pursuit of justice and the common good—is part of the history of salvation. No one is a minor actor in that drama. Each person is important.

I grew up in Concordia, Kansas. It's a typical small farming community of fewer than seven thousand people. But in those days—the 1950s—Concordia was also the hometown of Senator Frank Carlson, who played a major role in Congress. So it wasn't unusual for people in Concordia to think they had something valuable to say about politics and life in Washington, D.C. That's the way it should be. That's what the founders and framers of our country intended. Every reasonably intelligent person—which means just about all of us—has something important to add to the discussion of our nation's future. In this book, I speak as a Catholic citizen to fellow American Catholics and other interested Christians. But I hope many other people of good heart will see the importance

of these issues and find value in these pages. Ultimately, I believe that all of us who call ourselves American and Catholic need to recover what it really means to be "Catholic." We also need to find again the courage to be *Catholic Christians first*—not in opposition to our country, but to serve its best ideals.

ARCHBISHOP JOHN IRELAND, who liked a good fight, said many decades ago that "if great things are not done by Catholics in America, the fault lies surely with themselves—not with the republic."[2] I sometimes wonder how Ireland might have answered Ted Turner's famous crack that Christianity is a religion for losers.[3] It would be a debate worth paying to see.

Ireland served as a chaplain in the Civil War. He was a forceful, opinionated, energetic man; more than a match for any Turner-style media czar. He was an early supporter of racial equality. Presidents William McKinley and Theodore Roosevelt called him a friend. And he was a strong booster of the American experiment—in fact, too strong a booster, which caused him friction with the Holy See and many of his brother bishops. If he were alive today, I suspect Ireland would still be bullish on America. But he might be baffled by our nation's weirdly divided heart about religion over the last fifty years. The crude anti-Catholic bigotry of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries—the kind so familiar to Archbishop

Ireland—has mutated into something different. In our age, it involves an elitist contempt for religion in general, but Christianity in particular.

The late historian Christopher Lasch saw that today, "it is [the leadership classes]—those who control the international flow of money and information, preside over philanthropic foundations and institutions of higher learning, manage the instruments of cultural production and thus set the terms of public debate—that have lost faith in the values" of the American experiment and Western culture in general. In their self-reliance and overconfidence, our "thinking classes have seceded not just from the common world around them but from reality itself."[4]

I remember those words from Lasch every time someone warns me that Catholics shouldn't try to "impose their beliefs" on society. I recall his words whenever I read yet another unhappy opinion columnist urging Christians to respect—*revere* is often closer to the intended meaning—the separation of church and state.

In fact, Catholics strongly support a proper and healthy separation of the civil and religious dimensions in our national life. History is a great teacher, and one of its lessons is that when religion and the state mingle too intimately, bad things can happen to both. But of course, everything depends on what people mean by a *proper* and *healthy* separation. Some persons do sincerely and deeply worry about religion hijacking public life. I respect their

views. I also find their worries excessive. I agree that religious people who act or speak rashly can cause such fears. But too often, I find that both of these slogans—"don't impose your beliefs on society" and "the separation of church and state"—have little to do with fact. Instead, they're used as debating tools; a kind of verbal voodoo. People employ them to shut down serious thought, like the *four legs good, two legs bad* chorus in Orwell's novel *Animal Farm.* George Orwell had little love for the Catholic Church. But he had even less for the debasement of facts through pious-sounding political slogans. The truth is, *no one* in mainstream American politics wants a theocracy. *No one* in mainstream public life wants to force uniquely Catholic doctrines into federal law. So we need to see these slogans for what they frequently are: foolish and sometimes dishonest arguments that confuse our national memory and identity.

The "God question" is part of our public life, and we simply can't avoid it. *Does God exist or not?* Each citizen answers that in his or her own way. But the issue is not theoretical. It goes to first premises. It has very practical implications, just as it did at our country's founding. If we *really* believe God exists, that belief will inevitably color our personal and public behavior: our actions, our choices, and our decisions. It will also subtly frame our civic language and institutions. If we really believe God exists, excluding God from our public life—whether we do it explicitly through Supreme Court action or implic-

itly by our silence as citizens—cannot serve the common good because it amounts to enshrining the unreal in the place of the real.

People who take God seriously will not remain silent about their faith. They will often disagree about doctrine or policy, but they won't be quiet. They can't be. They'll act on what they believe, sometimes at the cost of their reputations and careers. Obviously the common good demands a respect for other people with different beliefs and a willingness to compromise whenever possible. But for Catholics, the common good can never mean muting themselves in public debate on foundational issues of faith or human dignity. Christian faith is always personal but never private. This is why any notion of tolerance that tries to reduce faith to a private idiosyncrasy, or a set of opinions that we can indulge at home but need to be quiet about in public, will always fail. As a friend once said, it's like asking a married man to act single in public. He can certainly do that—but he won't stay married for long.

THE ACTOR JAMES PUREFOY once played the early Roman leader Mark Antony. He told an interviewer that he had been stunned, in studying for his role, by the routine brutality of pre-Christian Rome.[5] Very few moderns can grasp what ancient society was like, he said, because "even if you are agnostic, even if you're an atheist," Christian morals profoundly frame the way you think

and live. The Christian system of values is "written all the way through all our actions, all the time." Christianity has so deeply shaped our environment that we take it for granted. Even people who have no faith at all live in a world largely created by the Christian faith.

I mention this because it connects in an odd way with an experience a friend of mine related while I was working on this book. On April 7, 2007, she returned a book to a local library. It was a Saturday. On the library door she saw a little sign that said, Closed Sunday. That struck her as strange. The libraries in her metro area are always open on Sunday. She drove to another library. She found the same sign. In the end, she visited seven different libraries in three different library districts. All of them typically open their doors on Sunday. All of them had similar Closed Sunday signs, but no explanation.

Of course April 8, 2007, was Easter Sunday. Easter is an inescapably *Christian* feast. It can't be fully secularized, no matter how many chocolate bunnies and painted eggs pile up around it. The Resurrection, coming on the heels of a very unpleasant execution, is not an easily tamed story. And *exactly this story*—the fact of Jesus Christ's crucifixion and resurrection from the dead—is the starting point, the source, the *seed* that became the faith, the moral code, the sense of human dignity, the culture, and the civilization we now take for granted every day.

Classical thought, Judaism, and the Enlightenment

also played important roles in forming the American mind. But Christians, in a uniquely powerful way, did the building of the American nation. At its best, that nation is an open and humane one, with plenty of room for other-believers and nonbelievers. But if we repudiate the source of our identity—if we treat the religious dimension of our shared public life as a word we don't mention in explaining a civic holiday—we're headed for real confusion.

Maybe the libraries my friend visited were afraid of Americans United for the Separation of Church and State. Maybe thousands of other libraries across the country *do,* in fact, celebrate Easter; but if they do, there's nothing theocratic about it, and the founders would fully understand.

Like it or not, American Catholics are part of a struggle over our country's identity and future. If this book helps some of us rediscover what it really means to be Catholic—the purpose of our time in the world, the lessons of our history, the responsibilities of citizenship, and the implications of the Christian faith we claim to believe—then it succeeds. We have obligations as believers. We have duties as citizens. We need to honor both, or we honor neither.