

Miss Manners, our mothers, and not a little concern for our own well-being and sanity have all taught us to steer clear of religion and politics in polite conversation. Except there is nothing else in this world to discuss. The Pharisees and the Herodians understood this. They wanted to entangle Jesus in His own words. So they set up the perfect question, “**Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?**” If Jesus had said “No,” the Herodians, those who were supporters of Herod Antipas, and who benefited from supporting Roman occupation, they would be ready to pounce, and label Jesus as a rebellious subverter of the state. A political trap. If Jesus had said, “Yes, it is lawful to pay taxes to Caesar,” the Pharisees, who detested occupation by pagan Romans, would be able to claim that Jesus was a collaborator and no true son of Israel. A religious trap.

Jesus answers, does not cower in fear to speak of matters political or religious. In His answer, Jesus, in fact, shows the importance of these two topics. He boils the two chief duties of every person down to giving both civil authority and God what is due them. It is popular among some Christians today, to set worldly concerns, and especially the messy business of politics, aside, thinking the Church should not be at all concerned with or speak on such matters. “The Church is built upon the confession of the Gospel, we’re not going to get too worked up about all this other stuff.” And it is true that the Church’s task and mission, assigned by God Himself, is this: to be built up in faith and love, embracing more and more of fallen humanity, to the praise and glory of God, through and for the sake of the giving of forgiveness, life, and salvation through the holy Gospel and Sacraments of Christ. The Church’s sole task is to be the beachhead of heaven on earth, conquering darkness with the life-giving weapons of light, giving the saving riches of God.

Jesus, however, teaches that we, Christian people who live in this world, we are to actively relate to civil authority, indeed, to the whole world around us. This necessarily involves politics. Our English word “politics” is derived from the Greek words for “citizen” and “city.” Everyone, Christians included, is a citizen of some land. Even the most remote farmer in the Nebraska panhandle is affected by what takes place in the cities where the seat of local, state, even Federal government is located.

St. Paul writes that “**there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God**” (Rom 13). Civil authority bears God’s authority. Paul later calls the one who is in authority “**God’s servant.**” So how is a Christian to relate to civil authority? There are those who chafe and rebel under authority. We are seeing open advocacy of anarchy in our nation, whole sections of cities taken over by this sinful rebellion. That is nothing new. There were those in the Reformation era who taught that Christians should have nothing to do with civic life. There are those who disrespect and speak ill of elected officials just because they did not vote for them, or because they dislike what this or that person said, did. I suppose now we have to factor in what they tweet. From Julius Caesar to Abraham Lincoln and beyond, there are well-known criticisms of all manner of public figures for reasons based on policy, personality, or a little of both.

Civil servants are not above correction. At this time in our nation, there are many in public service who seek the destruction of the foundations of every nation of every time: the basic right to life is denied the weakest and most vulnerable. The means of God’s gift of life, the bond of man and woman in holy marriage, is redefined, made whatever a simple majority thinks it should be. Even what it means to be a man or a woman has become fluid. If anything, it is government’s job to *protect* these institutions. That is not the case in this nation today. Whatever comes, this church, and this pastor will teach and confess the truth. This is not the church wading into politics, into a place it does not belong. These are things that God speaks about. Therefore the church must speak. These are truths written into creation, part of what it means to be human.

Civil authorities are not above rebuke or correction. But to despise them is to despise God. Peter bids the recipients of his letter to “**honor the emperor**” (1 Pet 2). That’s the Roman emperor. The pagan guy who claims to be divine. The same guy who will shortly have Peter and countless other Christians put to death. Peter says Christians are to honor that guy. Civil authorities are placed over us, in this nation, by the choice of the people, to maintain peace, to punish wickedness, to ensure order and safety.

Because this is the role of civil authorities, because they have the charge to oversee and protect our city, state, and nation, we, St. Paul says, are to pay what is owed to them. Jesus says we to give to Caesar what is due him. This is not because of his person, because he is perfect or deserving of it. It is because of the office he holds, the office of authority which is

given by God. So we give him “**taxes ... revenue ... respect...honor**” (Rom 13). And we in the Church, pray for our local, state, and national leaders, regardless of what party they are a member of, regardless, perhaps especially because of their weaknesses and failings. And that will continue however these coming weeks turn out. All this is what our God commands us to render to our authorities in the world.

But that is not all our Lord says to us today. We are also to render to God what belongs to Him. Caesar gets your taxes, your respect, your obedience. Sometimes we give him far more than that; far more than he is due. How our thoughts easily obsess over politics, especially during an election! Which has occupied your thoughts more these past weeks and months: who will occupy the White House, or the fact that Christ occupies His throne? Political idolatry, whether shouts of final deliverance from darkness or hopeless despair in defeat, we have seen on display aplenty. Repent.

The psalmist says, “**In God we have boasted continually, and we will give thanks to Your name forever...You who fear the LORD, trust in the Lord! He is their help and their shield**” (Ps 44; 115). It is the Holy Trinity who is to have your fear, love, and trust. God, not any man, not any party, not any nation. It is God who rules not just in His Church to call you to repentance and faith, bestowing eternal salvation, He rules also over this world. Not just the course of this nation, but the whole earth. He uses good and faithful rulers, and wicked and corrupt ones, to accomplish His purposes for His Church. Only a Christian can realize this.

Your hope is not in the fate of this nation or any nation. Your hope is in God. You are not here because the law permits you be here. You are here because you know that the Living God is here and He has called and gathered you here with your truest family: the children of God. You don't worship and praise Him here and in your life out in the world because the Constitution of these United States gives you permission to do so. What if it didn't? What if that was taken away? It is God who has opened your lips that your mouth may declare His praise. The heart that believes God's Word, that trusts in His salvation in Christ Jesus, it cannot stay silent, it cannot stay away, no matter what civil authority may command.

So we pray for our nation. We give thanks to God at particular times for the freedom we have in this land; the freedom to believe, confess, and live according to God's truth. We give thanks at particular times, like last week, for those who fought to protect those freedoms. We give thanks for those who even gave their lives to guard our liberties. But the reason we come to this place is our Lord who gives His grace without partiality to national allegiance. We come here to live around and from our Lord's life. We follow a whole other calendar here. We gather here as citizens of the kingdom of heaven.

And so Christian faith, baptism, the Sacrament, or Lord's Supper, the gospel, the Lord Christ at the right hand of God, and eternal life are not the government's to do with as it pleases. It is not the government that gives you perfect consolation. We see all over the world how the most stringent measures a government can take still cannot deliver from the threat of pestilence. The greatest medical advances for which we do well to give thanks to God, they still cannot undo our mortality. No politician can save you. So give the money Caesar prints back to him when he demands it. Respect him. Pray for him, that all those in authority would act justly, in accordance with the law written on all men's hearts, and that they would be given a spirit of wisdom. But put your fear, love, and trust the one who has rendered perfectly to God and man. He honored even oppressive pagan occupiers. He willingly putting Himself into the hands of those who dealt Him blatant injustice, torture, and death. In so doing, He rendered His very life as the final and perfect sacrifice to His Father for you.

Speak the truth for the good of this city and land, for the good of all those who dwell in them, whether they recognize it or not. God's Word tells you what that truth is. But hope in Christ Jesus and what He has done. Place all your confidence and trust in Him. Speak far more of the God who has relieved you of all need to fear and dread. There is nothing else in this world to talk about: that which is truly good for all, and the God who desires to save all, who has saved you.