

We are God's first

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In our Gospel for this weekend, we hear of how the Pharisees and Herodians plot together to trap Jesus in his speech. It is an interesting combination for the Pharisees were the zealous keepers of the law. They were anti-Roman. They distrusted and disliked the Herodians. The Herodians were supporters of Herod, who was supported by the Roman government. They were comfortable with the regime and, in that comfort, they did not want to make any waves.

The Pharisees and Herodians hated each other, but their hate for Jesus was far greater. And so they plotted with each other. They want to entrap Jesus in his speech. Notice how they approach him. They call him "Teacher" and say "we know that you are a truthful man and that you teach the way of God in accordance with the truth." They ask him if it is lawful to pay the census tax to Caesar. They know full well that if Jesus responds to their question with a "yes" or "no" answer, they will have entrapped him. If he said "Yes, you are to pay the taxes to Caesar," the people would be up in arms because the people of Israel mostly sided with the Pharisees. And if he said, "No, you are not to pay the tax," then the Romans would go after him and attack him and get rid of him for causing insurrection.

Jesus' response is to ask them to show him the coin then to ask them a question, "Whose image is on this and whose inscription?" They replied, "Caesar's." And Jesus replied, "Then render to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's" (Matthew 22:20-21).

It is important to understand that the king's authority and power over his people extended as far as his coins with his image on it were used. That is where his power and authority rested, wherever his money was used. Jesus granted that Caesar, the secular power, had a true role to play in society and economics, but Jesus primarily affirmed the essential principle that God comes first. Why? Because instead of being simply a king, a human power for the good of society, God is the source of each society and every life. He is the creator of all.

An even more beautiful truth is brought to mind by the symbol of an image on a coin. Because every human being is created in the image and likeness of God, each human person bears the mark of God's love, protection and authority in their very person. From

the very beginning that truth has been taught, revealed in Sacred Scripture – that every human being is created in the image and likeness of God as evidenced in Genesis.

As we reflect upon this encounter, we can ask ourselves, “What does that say for us today in our own time?” and “How is Jesus today speaking to us?”

We live in a country that is facing an election. It is an election that is difficult, to say the least. Both parties have abandoned basic principles concerning human dignity. We live in a country where the national religion has truly become atheism, whether it is in the actual denial of belief in God, or in the existence of practical atheism, living as if God did not exist.

We know that our forefathers, in establishing the Declaration of Independence, spoke of the law of nature and nature’s God. There was a basic recognition that all rights come from God, not from a monarch or the state. Our Declaration of Independence states in no uncertain terms, “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.” They knew within their hearts and within their minds through reason that there is a Creator who is over all peoples. There is to be no imposition of a particular religion, but there is to be the freedom of religion. They knew that God, not man, is the source of life and society. The Creator is the underlying essential principle behind life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

Some two-hundred and fifty years earlier, Thomas More and Bishop John Fisher both recognized that truth. They were beheaded because they understood the basic principle that in any society for a Catholic, in every civil society, God comes first. Thomas More would say before he died, “I am the king’s loyal servant, but God’s first.”

When we move forward in time, James Madison, the “father of the U.S. Constitution” recognized the duty of every person to render homage to the Creator. He makes a statement that many politicians today would challenge, that one’s duty to God comes first “...both in order of time and in degree of obligation, to the claims of Civil Society.”

Today, Catholic politicians and individual voters on both sides of the aisle have lost the sense of this fundamental principle that underlies every just and enduring society. Most especially, they have lost the sense of the inalienable right to life for the unborn child. Even without considering God in the equation, human life, for every human being, begins at the moment of conception. That is when human life begins. That is when your life began. And that is when Rep. Pelosi’s life began. That is when Sen. Biden’s life began. That is when Sen. Obama’s life began and Sen. McCain’s life began.

Sadly, the dignity of human life from the moment of conception is lost today. The truth nonetheless exists. Our forefathers recognized it but present day politicians and voters do not.

Furthermore, we have lost too this fundamental principle in what it means to pursue happiness. We see the attempted pursuit of happiness without God and the collapse of this pursuit in Wall Street and the economics of today. Greed has guided the hearts of men and women, in which a 40 million dollar bonus is not enough in one year. When you take God out of the equation and life is lived as if he did not exist, the only thing left to pursue is materialism, because there is no life after death, there is no judgment. And so greed guides the hearts of men and women when we lose that basic essential understanding of the presence of God.

We see that abandonment of God's presence, too, in the area of human sexuality. Fifty percent of marriages end in divorce. Women are treated as sexual toys and objects. People proclaim a "good" in same sex unions, living promiscuously, and moving from one intimate relationship to the next.

Once we lose God in the pursuit of happiness, and once we lose the sense of the dignity of the human person and the God in whose image and likeness we are truly created, then we lose all sense of any moral compass or any moral standard. Without God, can there be any morality at all? Or is it set by the thinking of the day that can change from generation to generation, rooted in no truths that are valid for every person in every generation?

We as a nation stand at a crossroads. There is a fork in the road between the culture of life and the culture of death. The culture of death made great inroads with activist judges in the 1973 court that created a so-called right to abortion. They, like the Pharisees and the Herodians, hid behind lies, they hid behind deceit, they hid behind a lack of reason and the majority said, "It is okay to destroy human life in all nine months of pregnancy."

Judges, politicians and voters who went so far as to state that human life may be destroyed at the beginning are now attacking human life at its end by support for assisted suicide. The next step will be to deny healthcare for the elderly and handicapped because they are no more of any use to society. Once the right to life is no longer understood as a gift from God, but attributed to people by the state, the road to further atrocities against human life is a spiral downward quite rapidly.

What many Catholic politicians and citizens have done by their actions and votes today is to sell their souls, because what they have done is to say, "We will be created in the image and likeness, not of God, but of a Democratic platform, of a Republican platform - that's whose image and likeness we will embrace." There is neither reason nor logic in their statements, but anything to gain power and this compromise leads only to blindness and darkness.

My sisters and brothers, you and I are not created in the image and likeness of Obama or McCain or a political party. We are created in the image and likeness of God. We must, as our forefathers did, place the God-given inalienable rights first, beginning with the right to life from the moment of conception until natural death. As bad as the economy is, as bad as the war is, the destruction of innocent human life, especially in the womb, is

a greater evil, and correction of this grave evil must take place. Each of us has a role in making this correction in our duties as citizens. To say that “the battle is lost” is to condone an intrinsic evil that will only lead to further evils.

A hundred years from now, this election will just be a moment in history. A hundred years from now all of us, or certainly most of us, will be dead. But I assure you, a hundred years from now, if we continue as a society on the course that we are on, embracing a culture of death, our society will no longer exist, because tyranny will have its way, as will atheism.

When there is no recognition of the primacy of God and human beings decide what is good and what is evil, anything can be justified. All we have to do is look at history and the atheism of China, the atheism of Russia, the atheism of Cambodia, and the atheism of Nazi Germany. Countries that embrace atheism reveal the truth – that is, if we do not embrace, as our forefathers did, the laws of nature and nature’s God, we will eventually collapse as a society.

As we continue with our celebration of the Eucharist, I encourage us during the course of this week to reflect upon the teaching of Jesus. Reflect upon, “How have I been influenced more by the politics of the secular world than by the truth of the Gospel reflected in the teachings of the Church? How have secular politics led me to ignore the truths upon which our country was founded?” Our forefathers recognized clearly that there are self-evident truths, “that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.” All of that is rooted in the understanding that, yes, we must render to Caesar what is Caesar’s, but we must render first to God what is God’s. God is at the heart and the foundation of all inalienable rights. He is the one who bestows them. A just society supports these rights and makes certain that they are recognized.

And so, throughout this week, let Jesus speak to your own heart. Where is he calling you to conversion and to a change of heart? He is calling all Catholics to be men and women of courage, to stand for the truth. He is calling for fortitude and, yes, that may mean martyrdom, but it will also mean faithfulness. For as Thomas More knew in his heart, we too must know in our hearts, that, yes, we are loyal citizens, but God’s first.