

Twenty-Ninth Sunday in Ordinary Time (A)

“Give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God.”

This saying of Jesus appears to mean that religion is one thing and politics is another. Thus, if we fulfill our religious duties, we may not be bothered with other political and social issues. If we achieve our political goal, we may not be concerned with its religious implications. Such an interpretation is the consequence of dualistic mind-set.

During the first century, the world was not divided into one part for God and the other for Caesar. People knew then that they are created in the image of God, and that all people are destined by the salvation from God, and that all people share the common dignity and the same right in the economic and political well-being of the society. (All creatures were under God’s sovereignty, and human beings had a special role in God’s ongoing creation.)

In the Bible, there is no separation between politics and religion. Jesus himself counseled his disciples to pay attention to the Pharisees and the scribes because “they occupy the chair of Moses” (Mt 23:2). Because of his non-violent policy of God’s kingdom, Jesus was rejected by religious leaders and died as “the king of the Jews” by Roman soldiers. When St. Paul said, “Jesus is the Lord,” it means “Caesar is not the Lord.” Therefore, if we remove the politically charged death of Jesus from the Bible, there is no Christianity. If we remove politics from the Bible, there is no Christianity.

Christians must participate in the political structures and influence people with a sense of responsibility thus, reshaping the society. Christians must inspire people to imagine how the world may be made more like the kingdom of God. If we are truly Christians, there should be immediate political solutions for problems such as the recent “gun violence” in Las Vegas and the “opioid addiction” in this Christian nation. Dr. Einstein once said that politics is more difficult than physics. Yes, politics is difficult, sometimes messy and crazy. But we need to seriously think about the fact that the US consumes 50% of the world’s morphine and possess almost 50 % of nuclear arsenals, even with only 5% of the world populations.

Returning to the gospel passage, it does not suggest that we do not value our political system. It suggests that fidelity to both religious tradition and political systems is not only possible, but is God’s will. Jesus makes it clear that we have a dual citizenship. We are citizens of two mutually inclusive worlds: the kingdom of God and the civil government.

When Jesus says, “Give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God,” he is not speaking of whether one pays taxes to Caesar or not. He is asking them to pay tax after having recognized the obligation to God. The point Jesus makes is this: If you are so concerned about paying taxes to Caesar, how much more concerned should you be about your service to God as our creator? The duty toward God always binds all and applies everywhere. Only then does the remainder—civil duty—come.

The Archbishop Angelo Roncalli, the papal nuncio to France, was a good politician as well as a religious man. As we know, the Archbishop later became Pope. John XXIII.

I would like to share with you stories about him. As a bishop, a diplomat, and a politician, his life was full of deep experiences of the love of God. Although he was elected as a “transitional pope,” he announced his intention for an ecumenical council only three months after his Installation. He did so against fierce protest from the Curia and other cardinals and bishops. (On the night when he announced his plan to convene the Second Vatican Council, Pope John had trouble falling asleep. He later admitted he talked to

himself that night: “Giovanni, Giovanni, why can’t you sleep? Is it the pope or the Holy Spirit who governs the church? It’s the Holy Spirit? Well, then, go to sleep, Giovanni!”)

St. John also was a man of humor. One day he visited a hospital in Rome, the Hospital of the Holy Spirit. Shortly after he entered the hospital building, the nun in charge of the hospital introduced herself. “Holy Father,” she said, “I am the superior of the Holy Spirit.” St. John responded delightedly, “You’re very lucky. I’m only the Vicar of Christ.”

Jesus has inaugurated the kingdom of God in this world where we live. Accordingly, we have a duty and a responsibility as citizens of both God’s kingdom and this secular world. †

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