

RENDERING UNTO CAESAR: THE CATHOLIC POLITICAL VOCATION

Archbishop + Charles J. Chaput, O.F.M. Cap.

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I want to do three things with my time tonight. First, Father Rosica asked me to talk about some of the themes from my book, *Render Unto Caesar: Serving the Nation by Living Our Catholic Beliefs in Political Life*. I'm happy to do that. Second, I want to talk about some of the lessons we can draw from the recent U.S. election. And third, I want to talk about the meaning of hope.

As I begin, I need to mention a couple of caveats. Here's the first caveat. Canada and the United States have a long and close friendship as neighbors. It's so long and so close that Americans often forget that our histories, our political structures and the ways we look at the world are, in some respects, very different. Obviously I'll be speaking tonight as an American, a Catholic and a bishop – though not necessarily in that order. Some of what I say may not be useful to a Canadian audience, especially those who aren't Catholic. But I do believe that the heart of the Catholic political vocation remains the same for every believer in every country. The details of our political life change from nation to nation. But the mission of public Christian discipleship remains the same, because we all share the same baptism.

Here's the second caveat. Not much of what I say tonight will be new. In fact, I've been saying pretty much the same thing about faith and politics again and again, every year, for the past 12 years. So if you've heard it all before, please feel free to snooze. I've learned from experience, though, that Henry Ford was right when he said that “Two percent of the people think; three percent think they think, and 95 percent would rather *die* than think.”

Ford had a pretty dark view of humanity, which I don't share. Most of the people I meet as a pastor have the brains and the talent to live very fulfilling lives. But Ford was right in one unintended way: American consumer culture is a very powerful narcotic. Moral reasoning can be hard, and TV is a great painkiller. This has political implications. Real freedom demands an ability to think, and a great deal of modern life – not just in the United States, but all over the developed world -- seems deliberately designed to discourage that. So talking about God and Caesar, even if it wakes up just one Christian mind in an audience, is always worth the effort.

The most important fact to remember about our discussion tonight is this: As adults, each of us needs to form a strong and genuinely *Catholic* conscience. Then we need to follow that conscience when we vote. And then we need to take responsibility for the consequences of our vote. Nobody can do that for us. That's why really knowing, living and submitting ourselves to our Catholic faith are so important. It's the only reliable guide we have for acting in the public square as disciples of Jesus Christ.

So let's talk for a few minutes about *Render Unto Caesar*. When people ask me about the book, the questions usually fall into three categories. Why did I write it? What does the book say? And what does the book mean for each of us as individual Catholics? This last question will be a good doorway into talking about the U.S. election last year, but let's start at the beginning first. Why did I write *this* book, *now*?

One answer is simple. A friend asked me to do it. Back in 2004, a young attorney I know ran for public office in Colorado as a prolife Democrat. He nearly won in a heavily Republican district. But he also discovered how hard it can be to raise money, run a campaign and stay true to your Catholic convictions, all at the same time. After the election he asked me to put my thoughts about faith and politics into a form that other young Catholics could use who were thinking about a political vocation – and it really *is* a “vocation.”

That's where the idea started. But I also had another reason for doing the book. Frankly, I just got tired of hearing outsiders and insiders tell Catholics to keep quiet about our religious and moral views in the big public debates that involve all of us as a society. That's a kind of bullying. I don't think Catholics should accept it.

Another reason for writing the book is that when I looked around for a single source that explains the Catholic political vocation in a simple way, it just didn't exist. I found that very strange. Public life is a demanding vocation, but it's not voodoo or advanced physics. As citizens, we can never afford to abdicate our shared civic life to a political or economic elite. A nation's political life, like Christianity itself, is meant for everyone, and everyone has a duty to contribute to it. A democracy 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 in the public square – is part of the history of salvation. No one is a minor actor in that drama. Each person is important.

So what does the book say? I think the message of *Render Unto Caesar* can be condensed into a few basic points.

Here's the first point. For many years, studies have shown that Americans have a very poor sense of history. That's very dangerous, because as Thucydides and Machiavelli and Thomas Jefferson have all said, *history matters*. It matters because the past shapes the present, and the present shapes the future. If Catholics don't know history, and especially *their own* history as Catholics, then somebody else – and usually somebody not very friendly – will create their history for them.

Let me put it another way. A man with amnesia has no future and no present because he can't remember his past. The past is a man's anchor in experience and reality. Without it, he may as well be floating in space. In like manner, if we Catholics don't remember and defend our religious history as a believing people, nobody else will, and then we won't have a future because we won't have a past. If we don't know how the Church worked with or struggled against political rulers in the past, then we can't think clearly about the relations between Church and state today.

Here's the second point, and it's a place where the Canadian and American experiences may diverge. *America is not a secular state*. As historian Paul Johnson once said, America was "born Protestant." It has uniquely and deeply religious roots. Obviously it has no established Church, and it has *non-sectarian* public institutions. It also has plenty of room for both believers and non-believers. But the United States was never intended to be a "secular" country in the radical modern sense. Nearly all the Founders were either Christian or at least religion-friendly. And all of our public institutions and all of our ideas about the human person are based in a religiously shaped vocabulary. So if we cut God out of our public life, we also cut the foundation out from under our national ideals.

Here's the third point. We need to be very forceful in clarifying what the words in our political vocabulary really mean. Words are important because they shape our thinking, and our thinking drives our actions. When we subvert the meaning of words like "the common good" or "conscience" or "community" or "family," we undermine the language that sustains our thinking about the law. Dishonest language leads to dishonest debate and bad laws.

Here's an example. We need to remember that *tolerance* is not a Christian virtue. Charity, justice, mercy, prudence, honesty – these are Christian virtues. And obviously, in a diverse community, tolerance is an important working principle. But it's never an end itself. In fact, tolerating grave evil within a society is *itself* a form of serious evil. Likewise, *democratic pluralism* does not mean that Catholics should be quiet in public about serious moral issues because of some misguided sense of good manners. A healthy democracy

requires vigorous moral debate to survive. Real pluralism *demand*s that people of strong beliefs will advance their convictions in the public square – peacefully, legally and respectfully, but energetically and without embarrassment. Anything less is bad citizenship and a form of theft from the public conversation.

Here's the fourth point. When Jesus tells the Pharisees and Herodians in the Gospel of Matthew (22:21) to “render unto the Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God's,” he sets the framework for how we should think about religion and the state even today. Caesar does have rights. We owe civil authority our respect and appropriate obedience. But that obedience is limited by what belongs to God. Caesar is not God. Only God is God, and the state is subordinate and accountable to God for its treatment of human persons, all of whom were created by God. Our job as believers is to figure out what things belong to Caesar, and what things belong to God -- and then put those things in right order in our own lives, and in our relations with others.

So having said all this, what does a book like *Render Unto Caesar* mean, in practice, for each of us as individual Catholics? It means that we each have a duty to study and grow in our faith, guided by the teaching of the Church. It also means that we have a duty to be politically engaged. Why? Because politics is the exercise of power, and the use of power always has moral content and human consequences.

As Christians, we can't claim to love God and then ignore the needs of our neighbors. Loving God is like loving a spouse. A husband may tell his wife that he loves her, and of course that's very beautiful. But she'll still want to see the proof in his actions. Likewise if we claim to be “Catholic,” we need to prove it by our behavior. And serving other people by working for justice, charity and truth in our nation's political life is one of the very important ways we do that.

The “separation of Church and state” does not mean – and it *can never* mean – separating our Catholic faith from our public witness, our political choices and our political actions. That kind of separation would require Christians to deny who we are; to repudiate Jesus when he commands us to be “leaven in the world” and to “make disciples of all nations.” That kind of radical separation steals the moral content of a society. It's the equivalent of telling a married man that he can't act married in public. Of course, he can certainly do that, but he won't stay married for long.

Partly because I'm a bishop and partly because I'm older and a little bit wiser, I don't belong to any political party. As a young priest I worked on Bobby Kennedy's campaign. Later I volunteered with the 1976 and 1980 campaigns for Jimmy Carter. So if I have any partisan roots, they're in the Democratic Party. But as I say in the book, one of the lessons we need to learn from the last 50 years is that a “preferred” Catholic political party usually doesn't exist. The sooner Catholics feel at home in *any* political party, the sooner that party takes them for granted and then ignores their concerns. Party loyalty for the sake of habit, or family tradition, or ethnic or class interest is a form of tribalism. It's a lethal kind of moral laziness. Issues matter. Character matters. Acting on principle matters. But party loyalty for the sake of party loyalty is a dead end.

I wrote *Render Unto Caesar* with no interest in supporting or attacking any candidate or any political party. The goal of *Render Unto Caesar* was simply to describe what an authentic Catholic approach to political life looks like, and then to encourage Americans Catholics to live it. And that brings us to the 2008 election and its aftermath.

Three weeks before last November's election, I wrote the following words:

“I believe that Senator Obama, whatever his other talents, is the most committed ‘abortion-rights’ presidential candidate of either major party since the *Roe v. Wade* abortion decision in 1973. [T]he party platform Senator Obama runs on this year is not only aggressively ‘pro-choice;’ it has also removed any

suggestion that killing an unborn child might be a regrettable thing. On the question of homicide against the unborn child – and let’s remember that the great Lutheran pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer explicitly called abortion ‘murder’ – the Democratic platform that emerged from Denver in August 2008 is clearly *anti-life*.”

I added that, “To suggest -- as some Catholics do -- that Senator Obama is this year’s ‘real’ prolife candidate requires a peculiar kind of self-hypnosis, or moral confusion, or worse. To portray the 2008 Democratic Party presidential ticket as the preferred ‘prolife’ option is to subvert what the word ‘prolife’ means.”

I like clarity, and there’s a reason why. I think modern life, including life in the Church, suffers from a phony unwillingness to offend that poses as prudence and good manners, but too often turns out to be cowardice. Human beings owe each other respect and appropriate courtesy. But we also owe each other the truth -- which means candor.

President Obama is a man of intelligence and some remarkable gifts. He has a great ability to inspire, as we saw from his very popular visit to Canada just this past week. But whatever his strengths, there’s no way to reinvent his record on abortion and related issues with rosy marketing about unity, hope and change. Of course, that can change. Some things really *do* change when a person reaches the White House. Power ennobles some men. It diminishes others. Bad policy ideas can be improved. Good policy ideas can find a way to flourish. But as Catholics, we at least need to be honest with ourselves and each other about the political facts we start with.

Unfortunately when it comes to the current administration that will be very hard for Catholics in the United States, and here’s why. A spirit of adulation bordering on servility already exists among some of the same Democratic-friendly Catholic writers, scholars, editors and activists who once accused proliferators of being too cozy with Republicans. It turns out that Caesar is an equal opportunity employer.

I think Catholics – and I mean here mainly American Catholics – need to remember four simple things in the months ahead.

First, all political leaders draw their authority from God. We owe no leader any submission or cooperation in the pursuit of grave evil. In fact, we have the duty to change bad laws and resist grave evil in our public life, both by our words and our non-violent actions. The truest respect we can show to civil authority is the witness of our Catholic faith and our moral convictions, without excuses or apologies.

Second, in democracies, we elect public servants, not messiahs. It’s worth recalling that despite two ugly wars, an unpopular Republican president, a fractured Republican party, the support of most of the American news media and massively out-spending his opponent, our new president actually *trailed* in the election polls the week before the economic meltdown. This subtracts nothing from the legitimacy of his office. It also takes nothing away from our obligation to respect the president’s leadership.

But it does place some of today’s talk about a “new American mandate” in perspective. Americans, including many Catholics, elected a gifted man to fix an economic crisis. *That’s* the mandate. They gave nobody a mandate to retool American culture on the issues of marriage and the family, sexuality, bioethics, religion in public life and abortion. That retooling could easily happen, and it clearly *will* happen -- but only if Catholics and other religious believers allow it. It’s instructive to note that the one lesson many activists on the American cultural left learned from their loss in the 2004 election -- and then applied in 2008 -- was how to use a religious vocabulary while ignoring some of the key beliefs and values that religious people actually hold dear.

Here's the third thing to remember. It doesn't matter what we *claim* to believe if we're unwilling to *act* on our beliefs. What we say about our Catholic faith is the easy part. What we *do* with it shapes who we really are. Many good Catholics voted for President Obama. Many voted for Senator McCain. Both parties have plenty of decent people in their ranks.

But when we hear that 54 percent of American Catholics voted for President Obama last November, and that this somehow shows a sea change in their social thinking, we can reasonably ask: How many of them practice their faith on a regular basis? And when we do that, we learn that most *practicing* Catholics actually voted for Senator McCain. Of course, that doesn't really tell us whether anyone voted for *either* candidate for the right reasons. Nobody can do a survey of the secret places of the human heart. But it does tell us that numbers can be used to prove just about anything. We won't be judged on our knowledge of poll data. We'll be judged on whether we proved it by our actions when we said "I am a Catholic, and Jesus Christ is Lord."

Here's the fourth and final thing to remember, and there's no easy way to say it. The Church in the United States has done a poor job of forming the faith and conscience of Catholics for more than 40 years. And now we're harvesting the results -- in the public square, in our families and in the confusion of our personal lives. I could name many good people and programs that seem to disprove what I just said. But I could name many more that *do* prove it, and some of them work in Washington.

The problem with mistakes in our past is that they compound themselves geometrically into the future unless we face them and fix them. The truth is, the American electorate *is* changing, both ethnically and in age. And unless Catholics have a conversion of heart that helps us see what we've become -- that we haven't just "assimilated" to American culture, but that we've also been absorbed and bleached and digested by it -- then we'll fail in our duties to a new generation and a new electorate. And a real Catholic presence in American life will continue to weaken and disappear.

Every new election cycle I hear from unhappy, self-described Catholics who complain that abortion is too much of a litmus test. But isn't that *exactly* what it should be? One of the defining things that set early Christians apart from the pagan culture around them was their respect for human life; and specifically their rejection of abortion and infanticide. We can't be Catholic and be evasive or indulgent about the killing of unborn life. We can't claim to be "Catholic" and "pro-choice" at the same time without owning the responsibility for where the choice leads -- to a dead unborn child. We can't talk piously about programs to reduce the abortion body count without *also* working vigorously to change the laws that make the killing possible. If we're Catholic, then we believe in the sanctity of developing human life. And if we don't *really* believe in the humanity of the unborn child from the moment life begins, then we should *stop lying* to ourselves and others, and even to God, by claiming we're something we're not.

Catholic social teaching goes well beyond abortion. In America we have *many* urgent issues that beg for our attention, from immigration reform to health care to poverty to homelessness. The Church in Denver and throughout the United States is committed to all these issues. We need to do a much better job of helping women who face problem pregnancies, and American bishops have been pressing our public leaders for that for more than 30 years. But we don't "help" anyone by allowing or funding an intimate, lethal act of violence. We can't build a just society with the blood of unborn children. The right to life is the foundation of every other human right -- and if we ignore it, sooner or later every other right becomes politically contingent.

One of the words we heard endlessly in the last U.S. election was "hope." I think "hope" is the only word in the English language more badly misused than "love." It's our go-to anxiety word -- as in, "I sure hope I don't say anything stupid tonight." But for Christians, hope is a virtue, not an emotional crutch or a political

slogan. *Virtus*, the Latin root of virtue, means strength or courage. Real hope is unsentimental. It has nothing to do with the cheesy optimism of election campaigns. Hope assumes and *demand*s a spine in believers. And that's why – at least for a Christian -- hope sustains us when the real answer to the problems or hard choices in life is “no, we can't,” instead of “yes, we can.”

Seventy years ago the great French writer Georges Bernanos published a little essay called “Sermon of an Agnostic on the Feast of St. Thérèse.” Bernanos had a deep distrust for politics and an equally deep love for the Catholic Church. He could be brutally candid. He disliked both the right and the left. He also had a piercing sense of irony about the comfortable, the self-satisfied and the lukewarm who postured themselves as Catholic -- whether they were laypeople or clergy.

In his essay he imagined “what any decent agnostic of average intelligence might say, if by some impossible chance the [pastor] were to let him stand awhile in the pulpit [on] the day consecrated to St. Thérèse of Lisieux.”

“Dear brothers,” says the agnostic from the pulpit, “many unbelievers are not as hardened as you imagine . . . [But when] we seek [Christ] now, in *this* world, it is *you* we find, and only you . . . It is you Christians who participate in divinity, as your liturgy proclaims; it is you ‘divine men’ who ever since [Christ’s] ascension have been his representatives on earth. . . . *You* are the salt of the earth. [So if] the world loses its flavor, who is it I should blame? . . . The New Testament is eternally young. It is *you* who are so old . . . Because you do not live your faith, your faith has ceased to be a living thing.”

Bernanos had little use for the learned, the proud or the superficially religious. He believed instead in the little flowers -- the Thérèse of Lisieuxs -- that sustain the Church and convert the world by the purity, simplicity, innocence and zeal of their faith. That kind of faith is a gift. But it's a gift each of us can ask for, and each of us will receive, if we just have the courage to choose it and then act on it. The only people who ever really change the world are saints. Each of us can be one of them. But we need to want it, and then follow the path that comes with it.

Bernanos once wrote that the optimism of the modern world, including its “politics of hope,” is like whistling past a graveyard. It's a cheap substitute for real hope and “a sly form of selfishness, a method of isolating [ourselves] from the unhappiness of others” by thinking progressive thoughts. Real hope “must be won. [We] can only attain hope through truth, at the cost of great effort and long patience . . . Hope is a virtue, *virtus*, strength; an heroic determination of the soul. [And] the highest form of hope is despair overcome.”

Anyone who hasn't noticed the despair in the world should probably go back to sleep. The word “hope” on a campaign poster may give us a little thrill of righteousness, but the world will still be a wreck when the drug wears off. *We can only attain hope through truth.* And what that means is this: From the moment Jesus said, “*I am the way, the truth and the life,*” the most important political statement anyone can make is “Jesus Christ is Lord.”

We serve Caesar best by serving God first. We honor our nation best by living our Catholic faith honestly and vigorously, and bringing it without apology into the public square and its debates. We're citizens of heaven first. But just as God so loved the world that he sent his only son, so the glory and irony of the Christian life is this: The more faithfully we love God, the more truly we serve the world.

Thanks for your time tonight.