

Homily
29OrdA
Oct. 21/22, 2017
St. Bernard Church
Deacon Tim Sullivan

This evening's Gospel raises the issue which has faced Christian countries for centuries: What is owed to Caesar and what is owed to God?

Some of the fundamental questions are these: What are the requirements that governments may reasonably impose upon citizens? And what should be the moral basis for government decisions?

In addressing these issues, I'm going to borrow heavily from a speech Pope Benedict XVI gave to the British Parliament 7 years ago.

I hope you will see as we go through these issues why our culture and the political process here in the United States are unraveling.

Pope Benedict, right at the beginning of his talk, said that if the moral principles which serve as the basis for government and judicial decisions are determined by nothing more than social consensus, a democratic country is on very shaky ground.

This is exactly where we are in the United States. Now that there is a Republican in the White House, there is an effort to undo everything the Democratic predecessor did. This effort will in all likelihood last 4 years.

At the end of 4 years, if a Democrat is elected, there will be an effort to undo everything that the Republican president did. And so it will go, on and on.

The reason that this unstable process could take place is that our country is very much divided right now. Democrats and Republicans hardly agree on anything. And one of the reasons for that is that the moral foundation that used to exist in our country and provided some stability for our political and legal process has virtually disappeared.

In the absence of any clear, widely held moral principles which could serve as a basis for political and judicial decision making, it will all come down to one deciding factor: Who has the power? And whoever has the power at any given time will be able to force its version of morality on the entire country.

Many years ago, Alexis de Tocqueville, a Frenchman, studied why democracy worked so well in America. His conclusion was that democracy would be effective in the United States and other countries so long as there was a general consensus about the moral principles that would serve as the foundation for the democratic process. If that moral consensus ever ceased to exist, he concluded, democracy would fail.

This is why democracy did not work during the so-called Arab Spring several years ago. With bitter divisions among the new voters in the Middle East, democratic elections only led to civil wars.

So where does religion fit in? What could religion possibly contribute that could be not only helpful but essential for democracy to flourish?

Pope Benedict asserted that in the Catholic tradition, the objective standards for constructive government action can be identified by the use of reason applied to what God has revealed to all humanity, even to those who don't profess to follow a religion.

What Pope Benedict is referring to is most powerfully expressed in St. Paul's Letter to the Romans, Chapter 1.

St. Paul writes:

18 The wrath of God is indeed being revealed from heaven against every impiety and wickedness of those who suppress the truth by their wickedness. 19 For what can be known about God is evident to them, because God made it evident to them. **20 Ever since the creation of the world, his invisible attributes of eternal power and divinity have been able to be understood and perceived in what he has made.** As a result, they have no excuse; 21 for although they knew God they did not accord him glory as God or give him thanks. Instead, they became vain in their reasoning, and their senseless minds were darkened... They exchanged the truth of God for a lie and revered and worshiped the creature rather than the creator, who is blessed forever.

Even non-believers, reflecting on the order found in created things, in nature, can from such reflection arrive at the objective moral principles that should govern any society.

Without this objective standard for moral principles, Pope Benedict said, reason will fall victim to distortions. We are seeing this now with legalized abortion, same sex marriage and subjective gender identity.

“Religion,” he stated, “is not a problem for legislators to solve, but a vital contributor to the national conversation.”

To the extent that a democratic country rejects the moral principles found in the natural order and best articulated by legitimate religions, the democratic process in that country will suffer.

In speaking about what belongs to Caesar and what belongs to God, Jesus was not saying that government and religion were two completely independent functions. St. Paul wrote in Chapter 13 of his Letter to the Romans:

Let every person be subordinate to the higher authorities, for there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been established by God.

In other words, all authority that exists on earth is permitted to exist by God and should function subject to his authority.

Our founders knew this and confirmed this with the phrase, “One nation, under God...”

I want to close with the following prayer offered by the chaplain to the U. S. House of Representatives in 1962:

O Thou Eternal God, may our minds and hearts be stirred with a deepening sense of patriotism and gratitude as we continue to think of that day of high and holy memory in our national history when a company of God-fearing men were guided by Thy divine wisdom to sign the Declaration of Independence

Grant that the blessings of freedom, which were purchased at a tremendous cost and which we prize so highly and are privileged to enjoy in such an abundant measure, may always be coordinated with the spirit of self-discipline.

Help us to cling with increasing tenacity of faith and fortitude to the great truth proclaimed by George Washington in his Farewell Address that religion and morality are indispensable and our national greatness hindered if we allow them to be subverted and obliterated by secularism.

Hear us in the name of our blessed Lord. Amen