

29th Sunday Ordinary Time

October 21-22, 2017

Is it lawful to pay the census tax to Caesar or not?

Readings: Isaiah 45: 1, 4-6; 1Thess 1:1-5; Matthew 22: 15-21

“Is it lawful to pay the census tax to Caesar or not?” I can recall as a young seminarian the case of a U.S. bishop who was in the news for publicly withholding a portion of his federal taxes in protest of U.S. Defense Department spending. While even then, I suspected that this position was not in the mainstream of thought amongst the bishops, it still forced me to ask some difficult questions. What if another bishop did the same thing with respect to federal funding of abortion? Would I feel any differently?

The vexing problem of Church-State relations has plagued Catholics in this country since the dawn of our nation, and goes much deeper than questions of taxes. The confusion regarding our duties to the state and to our faith, and the degree to which faith informs our political decisions has given rise to many misunderstandings.

I recall the many articles and editorials written about same-sex marriage, stem cell research, or more recently with respect to conscience clause protections. These issues are not going away. A typical editorial highlighted for me the underpinnings of popular thinking regarding the relationship between Church and state:

But church doctrine and federal laws are two separate considerations. In a country with free religion and speech, any religious group can adopt its own rules. It cannot, however, impose those rules on civil society.¹

To claim that people of faith seek to impose their rules on civil society begs the question because it presumes that proponents of contrary views on these same issues are acting differently, making no such imposition. News flash– Catholics are also citizens, but the Catholic Church in this country has no designs on a theocracy.

¹ Editorial, Minneapolis Star and Tribune 30 September 2011

This past week saw some positive developments in the area of religious freedom. Dozens of Catholic agencies that challenged the contraceptive mandate of the Affordable Care Act have reached a settlement with the U.S. Justice Department. Cardinal Wuerl of Washington D.C. noted:

“The settlement adds additional assurances...that we will not be subject to enforcement or imposition of similar regulations imposing such morally unacceptable mandates moving forward.”²

The Pharisees asked Jesus a trick question. If Jesus answered “Yes,” he would offend his fellow Jews, while a “No” would offend the Romans. More was conveyed in the clever answer than that taxes should be paid even to a bad government.

In his letter to the Romans, Paul teaches that Christians should submit to rulers and pay taxes (Rom. 13:1-7). The Catechism of the Catholic Church clarifies: “Submission to authority and co-responsibility for the common good make it morally obligatory to pay taxes, to exercise the right to vote, and to defend one's country.”³ Taxation serves the common good, and when we pay our taxes, we’re not automatically assenting to every expenditure; in fact, we know that our tax dollars fund some objectionable programs.

But a **nation is not its government**, but rather a people living together sharing certain fundamental principles. As a constitutional republic imbued with democratic principles, we have a legitimate say in the shape our government takes and a moral duty to participate. There has never been a time in which our government has acted completely in accord with Catholic principles, and I suspect that there never will be. We accept that there will be both bad and good, wheat mixed with brambles.

² Cardinal Donald Wuerl, Letter to priests of the Archdiocese of Washington, 16 October 2017.

³ Catechism of the Catholic Church, paragraph #2240

Paying taxes to a government that funds immoral programs is not tantamount to intentionally supporting evil. It is part of the price we pay for a representational government, and as citizens, we must exercise our duty to participate in civic life. We are called to be in the world, but not of the world. As an early Christian writer argued:

“...what the soul is in the body, that are Christians in the world. The soul is dispersed through all the members of the body, and Christians are scattered through all the cities of the world. The soul dwells in the body, yet is not of the body; and Christians dwell in the world, yet are not of the world.”⁴

Catholics in America do not have split loyalties. We are loyal to the Truth, and we have every right and duty as integral human persons to bring the light of this Truth into the workplace, the voting booth and our communities. We do so always respectful of others, but never pretending that our convictions are somehow separate from who we are. We desire to influence society, to imbue it with the Good News of Jesus Christ.

⁴ Epistle *Ad Diognetum* 5,5 and 10; 6,10