

Homily
29OrdA
October 8, 2020
St. Bernard Church
Deacon Tim Sullivan

Today's Gospel raises the issue of what belongs to Caesar and what belongs to God. This has always been a perplexing issue. What is the relationship between religious faith and government? This issue has been prominent this past week with the nomination of a very faithful Catholic to the Supreme Court of the United States.

It's popular in our country to talk about what we call the "separation of church and state." Many people take this to mean that religion and government are two separate spheres which do not overlap, as if religion should not influence government and the government should not have anything to do with religion.

Well, that's not exactly what the founders of our country had in mind. So I thought I would spend some time this morning speaking about the relationship between the Christian faith and the role of government, and how that played out when our country was formed.

There is a fundamental principle of Christianity which has played a huge role in the development of governments ever since the time of Christ.

This principle is that nature, the created world, reflects the Creator, and so we can learn about the Creator by using our human reason to study the order in nature.

This principle is captured in many places in the Bible. In Romans 1:20, Saint Paul writes that "Ever since the creation of the world, God's invisible attributes of eternal power and divinity have been able to be understood and perceived in what He has made."

In Chapter 17 of Acts of the Apostles, Saint Paul spoke of this in his address to the pagans in Athens. He said:

The God who made the world and all that is in it, the Lord of heaven and earth...made from one person the whole human race to dwell on the entire surface of the earth, and He fixed the ordered seasons and the boundaries of the regions, so that people might seek Him, even perhaps grope for Him and find Him, though He is not far from any one of us.

The author of the Book of Wisdom in the Bible expressed this principle even more poetically in Chapter 13, when he wrote:

1. For all men were by nature foolish who were in ignorance of God, and who from the good things seen did not succeed in knowing him and who is, and from studying the works did not discern the artisan...5 for from the greatness and the beauty of created things their original author, by analogy, is seen.

A corollary of this principle is that by studying the created world, every human person can come to some knowledge of Jesus Christ. How is this possible? Saint Paul explains this in this amazing language from the Letter to the Colossians:

“He [Jesus] is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For in Him were created all things in heaven and on earth, the visible and the invisible...all things were created through Him and for Him. He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together.”

By studying nature, then, even a non-Christian can come to know Jesus, or at the very least something about Him. And one who uses His reason to study nature can come to a knowledge about the truth of the Creator, even if he doesn't know God or Jesus by name.

The founders of our country were almost all Christian and all Protestant. And yet, based upon their belief that the essential principles of Christianity could be discerned by any human who properly used reason to study the order in nature, the language they used to communicate the fundamental principles of the new American government made no express mention of Jesus Christ.

So, our Declaration of Independence contains the following expressions:

When in the Course of human events, it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another, and to assume among the powers of the earth, **the separate and equal station to which the Laws of Nature and of Nature's God entitle them**, a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation.

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.

At the very end of the Declaration, our founders state their reliance on “the protection of Divine Providence.”

From the time of Jesus to the present, the combined influence of Christianity and the laws of nature have given rise to principles which we take for granted today: the dignity and equality of all human beings, government by consent of those who are governed. And these principles were incorporated by our founders into the Constitution and laws of the United States in a most unique way.

As was said by historian David Ramsey, “In no age before, and in no other country, [other than the United States, did human beings ever possess an election of the kind of government under which they would choose to live.”

We all know that, despite the wisdom of our founders, we Americans have not always been successful at implementing the inspiring principles of our founding.

Slavery is a sad example of this reality. However, even victims of slavery and civil rights leaders have not used slavery and racism to promote changes in the foundational structure of our government.

Frederick Douglass, a runaway slave and a superb orator, said of the founders of our country in the 1850’s: “I cannot contemplate their great deeds with less than admiration...For the good they did, and the principles they contended for, I will unite with you to honor their memory. Notwithstanding the dark picture [of slavery and racism], I do not despair of this country.

Over a century later, Martin Luther King expressed gratitude for what he called “those great wells of democracy which were dug deep by the Founding Fathers in the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution.” He urged his fellow citizens not to reject but to complete the promise of America by rededicating themselves to the permanent principles on which it was founded.

We need to understand and embrace our heritage before it is lost. Without it we will descend into confusion and chaos.

The bottom line in all this is that politicians, government leaders and judges in our country all must believe and honor the reality that the laws of nature are the laws of God, and the authority of God can never be superseded by any power on earth. Every Caesar has a boss.