

The Church of Saint Pascal Baylon

Fr. Mike Byron, Pastor: Sunday Homily

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In the little parish where I used to serve as pastor, St. Cecilia's in St. Anthony Park, there is a small brick schoolhouse next door to the church. It was once the parish school—four rooms—and it's been closed for decades. Today it's four condos. And on each side of the building, as you look at it from the street, there are two arches over a sidewalk that are chiseled in concrete in Latin. On one side are the words, "Pro Deo" (For God), and on the opposite arch it reads, "Pro Patria" (For Country). You don't see that motto much here in the Midwest, but I remember seeing it frequently on Catholic buildings when I was going to school in Boston, and I think that's because many of the parishes there were established a generation or two before the ones here.

It was a different time in both the church and the country—one in which both of them regarded the other with a great deal of suspicion. Many Protestant white government officials believed that Catholics were infiltrators of the Pope, who was then a foreign monarch of another country, as he still is. And Popes were very much opposed to the idea of freedom of religion, most notably in the U.S., and they condemned this idea of "Americanism" as recently as a century ago—the most prominent of which was our own Archbishop John Ireland.

But at the same time, there were actually school children who needed to learn at their Catholic school each day, and so it fell to the teachers and the pastors to navigate this national and international feud in the best way they could. And part of that way was very practical: In the physical construction of the school house, complete with "Pro Deo"—so the popes wouldn't hate us—and "Pro Patria"—so everybody else wouldn't hate us. Somehow, we all had to learn to live in this tension.

Today we still wrestle with it. About 15 years ago at the entrance of our St. Paul Seminary at the University of St. Thomas, a large stone pillar was installed with a cross at the top. A few years after that, two identical flag poles were installed on either side of that pillar, one flying the flag of the United States, the other flying the flag of Vatican City State. Whenever I see them I ask myself to whom we belong. Personally, I wish neither of those flags was there, but at least they are both dwarfed by the height and size of that pillar with the cross that stands between them. As we are profoundly aware today, flags can serve not only as things that unite people but just as much as things that can bitterly divide people. That's because a flag, like any symbol, doesn't mean the same thing to everyone who encounters it. Symbols are things onto which we project our own identities and loyalties. Back in Jesus' day, it was the coins that were those symbols for the Jewish people. What did they mean, and what did it say about you when you used one? That's what today's gospel reading is all about. To whom do we belong? Ultimately? Are we "Pro Deo" or are we "Pro Patria" when push comes to shove? Do we venerate the flag of the U.S., or the flag of the Vatican, when we have to choose?

Jesus' response is to say that those are false choices to begin with, because they are not equal in importance. We venerate the cross over and above all things. We are loyal to our own Lord, even when our church or our nation try to claim that they are just as important. Neither of them is as important as God. And if that seems like a dangerous thing to say, then it becomes understandable what got Jesus in so much trouble just before he was led off to his trial and his death.

And the symbol of the cross is not something that gets to mean whatever we prefer it to mean—unlike other symbols. The cross means Jesus Christ and his manner of life. And Jesus' life witness is right here for us to hear about in the gospels. It involves the calling out of hypocrisy, either religious or political. It involves rejecting bogus “either-or” claims to allegiance, or demands for them. It is faithful to exactly one thing: The will of the Heavenly Father, and absolutely nothing less, nothing else. We call all be faithful—legitimately—to many important and honorable life commitments at the same time. We can all hold multiple symbols in reverence. But there is not equality between any of them and God. And so when we are manipulated into thinking otherwise—as we often can be—we need to be completely clear about what stands tallest and in the center: The cross of Jesus Christ, above any flag.

That is often not easy or popular, but it is what it means to be faithful. “Pro Deo,” yes. “Pro Patria,” yes. But let’s not imagine that those are equivalent claims. For God, yes. For Caesar, yes. Jesus did not imagine those to be “equivalent” claims. We are here at this Eucharist because our sovereign teacher and guide is Jesus, and no one else.