

Render Unto Caesar

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The title of this NEWSLETTER is borrowed from Archbishop Charles J. Chaput who lifted it from Jesus' reply to the Pharisees: "Render therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's" (Mt 22:21). Archbishop Chaput used this title for his insightful little book."¹ It is appropriate for a bishop to have Catholics as his target audience, but Christians of other faith traditions would find his book eminently useful. I propose to pass on to you some of the ideas he presented sprinkled with thoughts of my own as we approach this critical election that could well determine the future of our country. I hope you will then be motivated to read the book. It's an easy read.

The book opens with a challenge to blind political party loyalty. "Party loyalty is a dead end. It's a lethal form of laziness. Issues matter. Character matters. Acting on principle matters. ... Real freedom demands an ability to think, and a great deal of modern life seems deliberately designed to discourage that."² Why is this important? We are inundated with confusing, foolish and dishonest arguments that baffle our understanding, memory and national identity. Short sound bites and slogans often add little true clarity.

The experience of Europe teaches us a great lesson, if we are willing to learn it: "A public life that excludes God does not enrich the human spirit. It kills it."³ We need only recall the rejection of God that led to the Terror of the French Revolution. Now France has become an ailing civilization with a hole in its chest that Islam is filling. "One-third of all Muslims in Europe now live in France."⁴ The hole was caused by the "hollowing out of its spirit through pride, greed, self-absorption, the rejection for children, the exclusion of God, and contempt of its own past, including its Christian soul."⁵ We can also look to the disastrous experiments of Nazism and Communism in Germany and Russia.

Americans need to grasp that "we create the future by our choices and our actions, here and now. One major challenge is that "an overfed understanding of our personal rights and individual freedom has squeezed out the responsibility and decorum we owe to each other."⁶ It's a virus Robert Samuelson called "a spirit of entitlement that leads us to believe that certain things are (or ought to be) guaranteed to us, like high-quality health care, global domination, and personal fulfillment."⁷ Stanford University's William Damon titled it a culture of indulgence. Sociologist Charles Derber referred to the "barbarization that comes from our

¹ Chaput, *Render Unto Caesar: Serving the Nation by Living Our Catholic Beliefs in Political Life* (New York: Doubleday).

² *Ibid.*, p. 4

³ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp.15-16.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 21-22.

greed and violence as we ‘pursue divisive and increasingly unattainable goals which cannot meet our deepest needs for respect, love and justice’.”⁸

Augustine figured this out as he grappled with his own demons in the fourth century: “Our hearts are made for you, O Lord, and in you only can it find rest.” When we don’t learn the lessons of history we repeat them.⁹ Politically, it is tragic that the U.S. ranks lowest among the world’s established democracies in voter turnout, but we have sixty-four lobbyist for every member of Congress – for a grand total of 35,000. In 2003, we had only three major colleges that required a course on the U.S. Constitution to graduate – the three armed service academies!¹⁰

Those who reject God like to present themselves as enlightened and smart. They paint believers as naively stupid. They ignore the reality that Christians believe that God created all persons in his image and likeness. Because of that principle *all* persons have inalienable rights – even atheists. The American identity was not the result of random chance. It came “from specific, religiously informed understanding of the world and human nature, and the convictions that derive from this understanding.”¹¹ The Founding Fathers never imagined a secular state, but a moral and ethical Christian society *without a state religion*. We owe a great debt to our Protestant forefathers.

In contrast today’s secularist present the fallacy “that religion is, at best, otherworldly. At worst, religion, is irrational and dangerous. This perspective ignores Christianity’s formative role in American life. ... The founders never intended a nation that privatizes religion and excludes it from involvement in public affairs.”¹² Secularism, in contrast, is a *cult* that would create a country without a soul. Then the strongest group would dictate the individual rights it deems appropriate rather than recognizing that individual rights come from God to whom the state is subordinate and responsible. In secularism the moral and religious life of individuals is tolerated as a scary guest as long as it has no real influence on public affairs. This viewpoint is now trumpeted in education, science, the media and the law. Christians need to push back, but to do so they must make a commitment “to knowing and loving God, and to allowing Him to change their character and lifestyle,”¹³ areas where many of us fall short.

The daunting challenge is not to bewail the darkness, but to live what we say we believe. What is needed are Christians of character who “*actively and without apology* take their beliefs into public debates. ... If we really believe that the Gospel is true, we need to embody it in our private lives and our public choices.”¹⁴ We must heed the warning of the historian Christopher

⁸ Ibid., p. 22.

⁹ See: “Lessons From History,” An essay on the Totus Tuus Ministries web site under [Contemporary Issues](#).

¹⁰ Ibid., pp. 20, 22

¹¹ Ibid., p. 28.

¹² Ibid., p. 29.

¹³ Ibid., p. 32.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 33.

Dawson: “This is the greatest misery of modern civilization—that it has conquered the world by losing its own soul, and when its soul is lost, it must lose the world as well.”¹⁵

Jesus promised that the truth will make us free (Jn 8:32), not comfortable. The vital question we need to ask ourselves is this: Do I truly want to follow Jesus Christ and love as he loved, or is it too inconvenient? This does not mean that Christians in general and Catholics in particular seek to force their beliefs on society. “Working to form the public conscience is not coercion any more than teaching the difference between poison and a steak is a form of bullying.”¹⁶ Witnessing to and advocating what we believe to be true is both honest and a duty. It is not coercion. What many critics dislike most about the Catholic Church is its unyielding coherence to its moral teachings. That will never change. Discipleship has a cost. Jesus did not say applaud me, but follow me – “radically, with all we have, and without caveats or reservations.”¹⁷

The Lutheran pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote the following from prison before he was hanged by the Third Reich: “I’ve come to know more and more the profound this-worldliness of Christianity. ... I don’t mean the shallow and banal this-worldliness of the enlightened, the busy, the comfortable or the lascivious, but the profound this-worldliness characterized by discipline and the constant knowledge of death and resurrection.”¹⁸

Bonhoeffer understood that we can’t reject Christ’s teaching in the way we live, and then claim to be following Jesus Christ. In regard to the U.S., Bonhoeffer wrote from Nazi Germany, “American democracy is founded not upon the emancipated man but, quite the contrary, upon the kingdom of God and upon the limitation of all earthly powers by the sovereignty of God.”¹⁹ Isn’t it tragic that too many Americans are unwilling to live and battle for that principle? When Christians uncouple what we do from what we claim to believe, we kill what we believe and are lying in what we do. Pope Pius XI cautioned German Catholics in the 1937, “It is not enough to be a member of the Church of Christ; one needs to be a living member in spirit and truth.”²⁰ In the great conflict between good and evil, C. S. Lewis wrote that “there is no neutral ground in the universe; every square inch, every split second, is claimed by God and counter-claimed by Satan.”²¹

It is important to recognize that when civil law can quickly become gravely evil if it is merely an agreement arrived at by a democratic process and guided by nothing higher than a majority vote. Adolf Hitler, for example, came to power by legal, democratic means. Secularism, is “an ideology that seeks to exclude religious views from public life and marginalizes God himself. It is no more neutral toward religion than Marxism or fascism.”²²

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid., pp. 38-39.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 45.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 46.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 49.

²⁰ *Mit Brennender Sorge*, Encyclical Letter on the Church and the German Reich, March 14, 1937, # 19.

²¹ “Christianity and Culture,” from *The Seeing Eye and Other Selected Essays from Christian Reflection*, p. 44.

²² Ibid., p. 71.

The strength of the Declaration of Independence is its foundation in the *natural law*. The natural law is not, as some claim, a sectarian idea. It teaches that “all creation has a ‘nature,’ an inherent order and purpose. By using reason, men and women can know what conforms to their human nature and is therefore good. This knowledge doesn’t require a theology or law degree; we all instinctively sense it. Murder, lying, cheating, stealing, exploiting the poor, abusing the weak, and elderly – these things are *universally* seen as evil whether a person is Jewish, Christian, Muslim, or agnostic, because they violate the natural law written into the human heart.

“When Catholics [and other Christians] oppose abortion, for example, they do so *not* because of some special Catholic [or Protestant] religious doctrine or simply because the church says so. Rather, the church teaches abortion is wrong *because it already is*. Abortion violates the universal natural law by abusing the inherent human rights of the unborn child.”²³ This wanton murder of millions of innocent babies creates, among other things, a culture of death in which the sacredness of human life loses its meaning. There is little essential difference between the killing of babies in the mother’s womb because of an abortionist’s greed and the inconvenience of the pregnancy, and the thousands of murders that annually occur in our cities. True, the first is legal and the second is illegal. But legality, a failed defense used by the Nazis at the Nuremberg trials, does not determine the morality of acts. In both cases the acts are gravely immoral.

The Declaration affirmed that nations are subject to a higher authority above their own man-made government and laws. The First Amendment guarantees freedom *for* religion, not freedom *from* religion. The charge against the British government was they violated the colonists’ natural rights to “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.” These were not new rights, but rights inherent in human nature – therefore, rooted in the natural law. The origin of these rights was not government, but theirs as humans “endowed by our Creator.” The Constitution’s First Amendment ensured religious liberty, which is now under attack by a secular minded administration.²⁴ The lessons of history teach us that no one’s freedom is safe when the government is not subject to God! When God is jettisoned from public life, the natural law goes with him and tyranny inevitably follows.

Joseph Ratzinger, now Benedict XVI, wrote in 1973:

“Today an illusion is dangled before us that a man can find himself without first conquering himself, without the patience of self denial and the labor of self control; that there is no need to endure the discomfort of upholding tradition, or to continue suffering the tension between the ideal and the actual in our nature. The presentation of this illusion constitutes the real crisis of our times. A man who has been relieved of all tribulation and led off into a never-never land has lost what makes him what he is; [he] has lost himself.”²⁵

²³ Ibid., p. 83.

²⁴ See: “Our Religious Liberty is Under Attack,” an essay on the Totus Tuus Ministries website under [Contemporary Issues](#).

²⁵ Ibid., p. 120 taken from “Why I am Still in the Church,” in *Two Say Why*, p. 67.

Regarding Catholics, Archbishop Chaput observed that “while Catholics had great success in business, intellectual fields, and the professions, many wore their ‘Catholic’ identity mainly as a cultural label. After the Council [Vatican II], this led to a gulf between their professional and religious lives.”²⁶ The Catholic Church has never taught the silly idea that “respect for conscience means that individuals have absolute sovereignty to determining their own truth, or that anyone’s choice of beliefs is as good as any other. Even the secular order admits that some choices are good and others bad.”²⁷

The flawed notion of conscience among Americans caused a shift away from the necessary struggle of *personal morality* into the fantasy that people are merely the products of social structures. Thus, evil acts become excusable facets of our natures. This has led to a cult of self-esteem and an unwillingness to judge. “It’s now hard to claim that anything *anyone* does, anywhere, is inherently wrong.”²⁸ The result is the “dictatorship of relativism about which Cardinal Ratzinger warned and I have discussed in a previous essay.”²⁹

Truth matters. It is important to recognize that half truths are whole lies. Personal experience as well as the lessons of history teach that “some ideas are bad. Some opinions are foolish. Some feelings are vindictive. And some people lie.”³⁰ Unfortunately, political language has become a device to obscure or defend the indefensible. This leads to a dishonest public debate characterized by the misuse of words that leads to poor elected choices, bad laws and dangerous politics. We used to call this lying; now it’s called *spin*. Therefore it is important today that citizens *think* their politics not feel them. This is why the Founding Fathers spoke forcefully about the necessity of a literate, educated citizenry.

In the electronic culture in which we live, the media has key flaws in addition to giving us vast chunks of unimportant information. “First, in their immersive effect, they obscure the large amounts of important information they *don’t* communicate. . . . Second, in their persuasive effect, the new media instructs the public on how to think and what they need.”³¹ In the current “fuzziness of meanings ‘choice’ is worthless – in fact, it’s a form of idolatry – if all the choices are meaningless or bad.”³² Rights don’t magically appear nor do they come from the state. They are endowed by our Creator with obligations attached to them. “Conscience is never merely a matter of personal preference or opinion.”³³ It has the tough job of telling us the hard truth about our actions, not rationalizing our misbehavior.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 123.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 129.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 132.

²⁹ See: “The Dictatorship of Relativism,” an essay on the Totus Tuus Ministries website under [Contemporary Issues](#).

³⁰ Ibid., p. 139.

³¹ Ibid., p. 141.

³² Ibid., p. 147. See: “Fallacy of Choice,” an essay on the Totus Tuus Ministries web site under [Moral Issues](#).

³³ Ibid., p. 148.

Mature Christians need to distinguish between legitimate compromise and cowardice as well as between prudence and weakness in ourselves and others. Compromise frequently helps the political process achieve progress. Currently, in the U.S. we live under the unjust law that allows and even fosters abortion. We sin only when we abandon the struggle to change it or when we support it. The direct killing of unborn children is murder, without exception. It can never be excused. No political party should support it. This evil law must be changed. "Today, in practice, all political parties have self-described Catholics who are willing to trade their religious and moral convictions for power... This is why Thomas More has so much to teach us, even today: He always placed the moral content of an issue before factional loyalty and personal interests."³⁴ But that takes real courage, even if one is not beheaded. In contrast, "the 'separation of church and state' that John F. Kennedy tried to articulate in his career starts to mean divorcing religious faith from public life, it soon leads to separating government from morality and citizens from their consciences. And that leads to politics without character, which has now become a national disease."³⁵

It is a fallacy to discuss abortion primarily as a religious issue. The fundamental issue is one of *human rights*, namely, the child's right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. Furthermore, abortion is never a private matter, as some falsely claim. Abortion has terrible social consequences because the unborn child is killed, often with terrible mental and physical side effects for the mother who is frequently pressured into this horrific procedure. When one person's human rights are unjustly denied everyone's human rights are at risk.

This discussion of *Render Unto Caesar* ends with the question opening chapter ten: "What needs to be done?" This is the archbishop's challenging response:

"For Catholics, every new beginning must start with a return to Jesus Christ, the gospel, and the church. The heart of renewal is pretty straightforward: Do we *really* believe that Jesus Christ is our savior? Do we *really* believe that the Gospels are the Word of God? Do we *really* believe that the Catholic Church is the true mother church that Christ himself founded, and that she teaches in his name? Many of us who call ourselves 'Catholic' live as if we'd never really thought about any of these questions. In fact, by our actions, many of us witness a kind of practical atheism: paying lip service to God, but living as if he didn't exist. Many of us don't really believe we need a savior."³⁶

A true Christian animates the world by the vibrancy of his example and his willingness to live and defend his faith at all costs, even his life. "To Caesar we owe respect and prayers for our leaders (1 Tim 2:2); respect for the law; obedience to proper authority; and service to the common good. It's a rather modest list. And note that *respect* is not subservience, or silence, or inaction, or excuse making, or acquiescence to grave evil in the public life we all share. In fact, ultimately, everything important about human life belongs not to Caesar but to God: our intellect, our talents, our free will; the people we love; the beauty and goodness in the world;

³⁴ Ibid., pp. 168-169. See: "Conscience: the Moral Trump Card?" an essay on the Totus Tuus website under [Moral Issues](#).

³⁵ Ibid., p. 169.

³⁶ Ibid., p. 182.

our soul, our moral integrity, our hope for eternal life. *These* are the things that matter. These are the things worth struggling to ennoble and defend. And none of them came from Tiberius or anyone who succeeded him.

“We owe Caesar one final thing: our witness not simply as loyal citizens but also as *faithful* ones.”³⁷

³⁷ Ibid., pp. 218-219.