

# Render Unto Caesar: Personal Faith and Public Duty

(EDITED)

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## **DESCRIPTION**

Archbishop Chaput delivered this address on February 7, 2009 to the John Paul II Society of Ireland. He spoke about the need for Catholics to stand up for their faith in the public arena, and examined how the early Christians successfully evangelized the Roman empire.

Today the Church in the United States is quite diverse with people from just about everywhere – Italians, Poles, Filipinos, Africans, Latin Americans. My own background is French and Native American. I'm a registered member of the Prairie Band Potawatomi tribe through my mother's family, and I'm very proud of it.

Americans have never had a nationally dominant Church. They've never been occupied by a foreign power. And while Americans have always had a high level of religious observance and still do, they've never had a war of religion, or a religious persecution, or even a single dominant Protestant community. The Catholic Church in the United States is also very young. Denver became an archdiocese barely 60 years ago – about 800 years after the Diocese of Dublin.

Catholics in America have always been immigrants and newcomers. We've always been a minority in a non-Catholic country. As a result, the Catholic Church in the United States has always had to fight discrimination, and anti-Catholic prejudice is still a feature of American public life.

Being a "Catholic" – and I mean genuinely Catholic – makes us much more similar than we are different. The task of being a Christian disciple changes in its details from country to country and age to age, but the basic mission is always the same – to bring the world to Jesus Christ; and Jesus Christ to the world.

What does that mean for us in our political lives? No matter what our country, it means that each of us needs to form a strong and genuinely Catholic conscience. Then we need to follow that conscience when we exercise our duties as citizens. And then we need to take responsibility for the consequences of our political choices. Nobody can do that for us. That's why really knowing, loving and living our Catholic faith is so important. It's the only reliable guide we have for acting in the public square as disciples of Jesus Christ.

The topic of our conversation today is "Render unto Caesar." It's a theme I've spoken about many times over the past decade because I think it goes to the heart of the problems we all face in living our Christian vocation in the modern world. The Word of God tells us to be leaven in the world and to make disciples of all nations. But the word of the mass media and many of our cultural and political leaders tells us to be "tolerant," to fit in, to "grow up" and to stop making a lot of religious noise. Obviously we can't follow both voices at the same time.

Those words "Render unto Caesar" come from the wonderful passage in Matthew 22 where the Sadducees and Pharisees – who normally hate each other – join

together to set a political trap for Jesus. They ask Jesus, "Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar or not?"

Of course, if Jesus says yes, they'll call him a Roman collaborator. If he says no, the Romans will see him as a rebel and a troublemaker. So Jesus asks for a coin stamped with the image of the Emperor Tiberius. The Gospel passage then reads: "And Jesus said to them, 'Whose likeness and inscription is this?' They said, 'Caesar's.'" Then he said to them, 'Render therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's.'"

Jesus does three crucial things here. First, he acknowledges that Caesar does have rights; that a difference does exist between the concerns of God and the concerns of Caesar. But second, Jesus desacralizes – in effect, he demotes – Caesar by suggesting that Caesar has no rights over those things that belong to God. Only God is God, which means that Caesar is not God. And third, Jesus remains silent about what exactly belongs to either God or Caesar. Figuring that out belongs to us.

It can be hard work. No detailed map exists because while human nature doesn't change, human circumstances change all the time. And so does the face of Caesar. The Roman Empire, a Middle Eastern dictatorship and a modern industrial democracy will have very different laws, philosophies and political structures. But ultimately, whether they're doing good or doing evil, all forms of government embody the state. They all embody worldly power. Scripture tells us that we owe secular leaders our respect and prayers; respect for the law; obedience to proper authority; and service to the common good. But it's a rather modest list of duties. And we need to remember that "respect" for Caesar does not mean subservience, or silence, or inaction, or excuse-making or acquiescence to grave evil in the public life we all share.

In fact, the more we reflect on this biblical text, the more we realize that 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, our soul, our moral integrity, our hope for eternal life. These are the things worth struggling to ennoble and defend, and none of them came from Tiberius or anyone who succeeded him.

So what does that imply for our actions right now, today, in public life? I think the answer to that question can be condensed into eight basic points.

First, George Orwell said that one of the biggest dangers for modern democratic life is dishonest political language. Dishonest language leads to dishonest politics – which then leads to bad public policy and bad law. We need to speak and act in a spirit of truth. And we need to demand the same behavior from other people, including our elected and appointed leaders.

Second, "Catholic" is a word that has real, objective meaning. We don't control or invent that meaning as individuals. We inherit it from the Gospel and the experience of the Church over the centuries. We can choose to be something else, but if we choose to call ourselves Catholic, then that word has real consequences for what we believe and how we act. We can't truthfully claim to be Catholic and then act like we're not.

Third, being a Catholic is a bit like being married. We have a relationship with the Church and with Jesus Christ that's very similar to being a spouse. And again, that has consequences. If a man says he loves his wife, his wife will want to see the evidence in his love and fidelity. The same applies to our relationship with God. If we say we're

Catholic, we need to prove that by our love for the Church and our fidelity to what she teaches and believes. Otherwise we're just fooling ourselves, because God certainly won't be fooled.

Fourth, the Church is not a political organism. As Pope Benedict XVI wrote as a young theologian and has repeated many times since: The Church should have no interest in partisanship because getting power or running governments is not what she's about, and the more closely she identifies herself with any single party, the fewer people she can effectively reach.

Fifth, Scripture and Catholic teaching do, however, have public consequences because they guide us in how we should act in relation to one another. Henri Bergson once said that, "The motive power of democracy is love." We serve our democratic institutions best when we love our country in the highest Christian sense; in other words, when we nourish its greatest ideals through our own moral character and active Catholic witness.

Loving God requires that we also love the people He created, which means we need to treat them with justice, charity and mercy. Being a Catholic involves solidarity with other persons. The Catholic faith has heavy social justice implications – and that means it also has cultural, economic and political implications. Our faith is never primarily about politics; but Catholic social action – including political action – is always a natural byproduct of the Church's moral message. We can't call ourselves Catholic, and then simply stand by while immigrants get mistreated, or the poor get robbed, or unborn children get killed. The Catholic faith is always personal, but it's never private. If our faith is real, then it will bear fruit in our public decisions and behaviors, including our political choices.

Sixth, each of us needs to follow his or her own properly formed conscience. But "conscience" doesn't emerge miraculously from a vacuum. It's not a matter of personal opinion or preference. It takes prayer, study and work. If our conscience has the habit of telling us what we want to hear on difficult issues, then we probably have a badly formed conscience. A healthy conscience is the voice of God's truth in our hearts, and it should usually make us uncomfortable, because none of us is yet a saint. The way we get a healthy conscience is by submitting it and shaping it to the will of God; and the way we find God's will is by opening our hearts to the counsel and guidance of the Church that Jesus Christ left us. If we find ourselves disagreeing as Catholics with the teaching of our Catholic faith on a serious matter, it's probably not the Church that's wrong. The problem is much more likely with us.

Seventh, how do we make good political choices when so many issues today are so important and complex? The first principle of Catholic social thought is: Do good and avoid evil. And the first and most urgent application of that principle is: Don't deliberately kill the innocent, and don't collude in allowing somebody else to do it. The right to life is the foundation of every other human right. The reason that abortion and other closely related bioethical issues are so foundational is not simply because Catholics love little babies – although we certainly do – but because revoking the personhood of any unborn child makes every other definition of personhood and human rights politically contingent. The moral standards that govern Catholic thinking on abortion are so demanding because an unborn life is always at stake.

Eighth and lastly, the heart of truly "faithful" Catholic citizenship is this: Whatever our home nation happens to be, we're better citizens when we're more faithful Catholics. We're citizens of heaven first. Our time here is limited. This life passes. Eternity is forever. Charles Péguy once wrote that, "Freedom is a system based on courage." We can't be free and be cowards at the same time. We need to act in this world in a manner that's true to who we are as Catholics, with lives of Christian service to the poor and afflicted – including the unborn child, the immigrant, the homeless and the elderly. The more authentically Catholic we are in our lives, our choices, our actions and our convictions, then the more truly we will contribute to the moral and political life of our nation.

American Catholics have always felt a great pressure to assimilate, to soften or abandon their Catholic identity so they can succeed in a dominantly Protestant and now secular society. But even many American Catholics who disagree with Church teaching still have a strong sentimental attachment to the Church. The reason is simple. For many years the Church was the main defender of their basic rights in a hostile culture. History is important because it shapes who we are. And memory is important because it helps us understand and learn from the past.

But for believers, no matter what our past sins or achievements, every breath we take is an opportunity for conversion and a new beginning. Our task today, as fellow Catholics - in the United States and everywhere the Church preaches the Gospel of Jesus Christ – is to make ourselves helpers of God as He builds a culture of justice, mercy and life.

You and I can do this task. It's not impossible. People often say we're living at a "post-Christian" moment. That's supposed to describe the fact that Western nations have abandoned or greatly downplayed their Christian heritage in recent decades. But our "post-Christian" moment actually looks a lot like the pre-Christian moment. The signs of our times in the developed world—morally, intellectually, spiritually and even demographically—are very similar to the world at the time of the Incarnation.

The truth is, the challenges we face as European and American Catholics today are very much like those facing the first Christians. And it might help to have a little perspective on how they went about evangelizing their culture. They did such a good job that within 400 years Christianity was the world's dominant religion and the foundation of Western civilization – and of course, the great Irish monastic tradition was one of its many fruits.

Rodney Stark, by the way, is an agnostic. He's not a Christian believer. But he was intrigued by a couple of key questions. How did Christianity succeed? How was it able to accomplish so much so fast? As a social scientist, he focuses only on the facts he can verify. And he concludes that Christian success flowed from two things: first, Christian doctrine, and second, people being faithful to that doctrine. Stark writes that: "An essential factor in the [Christian] religion's success was what Christians believed . . . And it was the way those doctrines took on actual flesh, the way they directed organizational actions and individual behavior, that led to the rise of Christianity."

Or we can put it another way: The Church, through the Apostles and their successors, preached the Gospel of Jesus Christ. People believed in that Gospel. But the early Christians didn't just agree to a set of ideas. Believing in the Gospel meant

changing their whole way of thinking and living. It was a radical transformation – so radical they couldn't go on living like the people around them anymore.

Stark says that one of the key areas in which Christians rejected the pagan culture around them was marriage and the family. From the start, to be a Christian meant believing that sexuality and marriage were sacred. From the start, to be a Christian meant turning away from abortion, infanticide, birth control, divorce, homosexual activity and marital infidelity – all those things widely practiced by their Roman neighbors.

The early Christians understood that they were members of a new worldwide family of God more important than any language or national borders. They saw the culture around them, despite all of its greatness and power, as a culture of despair, a society that was slowly killing itself. In fact, when you read early Christian literature, things like adultery and abortion are often described as "the way of death" or the "way of the [devil]."

Here's the point I want to leave you with: If the world of pagan Rome and its Caesars could be won for Jesus Christ, we can do the same in our own day. But what it takes is the zeal and courage to live what we claim to believe.

God created each of you. Each of you matters. Each of us has the vocation to be a missionary of Jesus Christ where we live and work and vote. Each of us is called to bring Christian truth to the public debate, to be vigorous and unembarrassed about our Catholic presence in society, and to be a leaven in our nation's public life. That work needs to begin here, today, right now, among the people Jesus called to be his disciples and friends – in other words, you Catholic men and women, the people of God. All of us here today already have that hunger to make a difference in our hearts. Now we need to act on it. Now we need to live it. So let's pray for each other, and encourage each other, and get down to the Lord's work.