

Mass for the Nation
November 7, 2016, 12:00 Noon
Saint Francis de Sales Chapel
Most Reverend Daniel E. Thomas

Readings: James 3:13-18; Psalm 85; Mt 22:15-21.

“Render to God what belongs to God.” Like all citizens of our country, we are preparing to elect national and local governmental leaders tomorrow. As Catholic citizens, we are spending today in prayer and fasting, united with all the faithful of the Diocese of Toledo, and offering this Mass for the Nation, so that with rightly formed consciences, our voting may lead to a nation committed to respect for the dignity and sanctity of all human life; to the protection of religious liberty, and to a deeper commitment to justice and peace.

The Gospel of Matthew we just heard contains a number of insightful indicators, if you will, on who we are and how we are to act, particularly at a moment like this.

Jesus indeed recognized that those to whom he was speaking were in fact citizens of the society at the time. The disciples of the Pharisees and the Herodians try to trip Jesus up. They are looking for Him to be caught in a trap and thus discredit Him and end His mission.

As followers of Jesus and His Church, we know that, as citizens of our society now, we have a right and a duty to contribute to the

common good and, by our being active in the public square, to have a positive effect on the life of the nation. That's why we should exercise our civic duty to vote, to make our voice heard and to contribute, please God, to upholding the moral fabric of our land. There are those who would like to catch us in a trap, to discredit us, and so end the mission we have received from the Lord as disciples.

The disciples of the Pharisees and the Herodians affirm, even if it is nothing more than empty flattery, that Jesus is a truthful man who teaches the way of God in accord with the truth. They even go so far as to say that he is not concerned with anyone's opinion, for he has no regard for a person's status. We are called to be truthful, to live out in thought, word and deed the way of God in accord with the truth we have received. We are likewise called not to be concerned by others' opinions, and not to regard status. Thus we vote not based on sex or race or financial status, but we vote based on the truths of our faith, and how candidates measure up to those truths. As a bishop, I do not in this homily, nor will I, nor should I, tell someone for whom or against whom to vote. But it is my moral responsibility to inform and encourage the flock to form their consciences in accord with God's truth.

Today, each of us prays and fasts so as to be enlightened by the Lord's wisdom in our voting, because our voting is for the good of our country. In the first reading from the Letter of James, we heard:

“Who among you is wise and understanding? Let him show his works by a good life in the humility that comes from wisdom.” Then we heard this description, which some might say aptly applies to certain candidates running for public office: “But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast and be false to the truth. Wisdom of this kind does not come down from above but is earthly and unspiritual. For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there is disorder and every foul practice.” Instead, the wisdom we are seeking is this: “[T]he wisdom from above is first of all pure, then peaceable, gentle, compliant, full of mercy and good fruits, without inconstancy or insincerity.”

In the Gospel, Jesus went so far as to call those who approached him “hypocrites.” They were outwardly strictly religious, but inwardly lacking in commitment to truth, love and humility. We strive to avoid being called “hypocrites” by being authentic disciples. We can neither outwardly pretend to be religious while inwardly being something very different; nor inwardly be truly religious, and outwardly fail to speak and act in accord with our beliefs. We cannot be hypocrites! Jesus calls each one of us to be an authentic disciple.

Jesus confounds those who approach him, because he affirms the coin belongs to Caesar, and that citizens should render to Caesar what belongs to Caesar. But he immediately affirms that there is another citizenship, a higher citizenship. They should render to God

what is God's. As faithful citizens of our nation, we participate in the electoral process, acting for the common good of the land. But we recognize that our higher citizenship is in heaven, and it is that citizenship which should characterize and define all our actions as citizens of our nation. When we vote, we are conscious that we do so first called to be citizens of heaven, so that we might first "render to God what belongs to God."

On this eve of the election, we ready ourselves by prayer and fasting. Why? Because these are the ways Jesus himself recommends to confront the most difficult of situations. We are committed to be faithful citizens of our nation, and first, act as citizens of heaven. Throughout this presidential election cycle, I cannot tell you the people who have said to me: "I don't know who I can possibly vote for, in the end I don't want to vote for either of them." There seems to be universal consensus, our choice is between two seriously flawed candidates. Some folks have said they simply will not vote, others that they will only vote for certain offices. But I would urge we should exercise our civic duty to vote, being well informed of the candidate's positions and weighing them against our deeply held religious beliefs.

There is a classic moral principal which guides us when making a choice in impossible situations, that is, we choose between the lesser of two evils. If it is impossible to make a moral decision to vote for one or the other individual candidate, then it is imperative to examine the

party platform on which that candidate stands.

That said, Pope Saint John Paul II encouraged and taught us: “In the case of an intrinsically unjust law, such as a law permitting abortion or euthanasia, it is [therefore] never licit to obey it, or to ‘take part in a propaganda campaign in favor of such a law, or to vote for it’” (*Evangelium Vitae*, 73).

In the Pastoral Statement of the US Catholic Bishops, *Living the Gospel of Life*, we are reminded: “Any politics of human dignity must seriously address issues of racism, poverty, hunger, employment, education, housing, and health care. Therefore, Catholics should eagerly involve themselves as advocates for the weak and marginalized in all these areas...*But being ‘right’ in such matters can never excuse a wrong choice regarding direct attacks on innocent human life.* Indeed the failure to protect and defend life in its most vulnerable stages renders suspect any claims to the ‘rightness’ of positions in other matters affecting the poorest and least powerful of the human community. If we understand the person as the ‘temple of the Holy Spirit’ – the living house of God – then these latter issues fall logically into place as the crossbeams and the walls of that house. *All direct attacks on innocent human life, such as abortion and euthanasia, strike at the house’s foundation.* These directly and immediately violate the human person’s most fundamental right – the right to life” (22).

The task of voting in this election cycle is not an easy task for those who are serious about their Catholic faith, for those who are committed to striving daily to be authentic disciples of Jesus, for those who wish not to be judged as hypocrites, for those who desire to witness to the Gospel and the Culture of Life.

The task of every responsible Catholic, no matter who is elected on Tuesday, remains the same going forward: that we are committed to being good citizens of the nation we love by working for truth and for the common good; that we are committed to defend our deeply held religious beliefs, so that life, religious liberty and the pursuit of happiness in justice and peace, may be guaranteed to all people; and that we are committed to living our daily lives, inspired by the Word of God and nourished by the Body and Blood of the Lord, so that one day, we might live forever as citizens of heaven.

We pray this day that, as responsible citizens of this nation, but conscious that our higher citizenship is in heaven, strengthened by prayer, fasting and this Holy Eucharist, we may, in thought, word and deed, live, act and vote in such a way that we “Render to God what belongs to God.”