

The Red Mass  
Phoenix, Arizona  
January 27, 2003, 5:30 p.m.

Homily

*Readings: Isaiah 58:6-11, Philippians 4:6-9, Matthew 22:15-21*

It is a joy to come at last to Phoenix for this Red Mass invoking the guidance of God's Holy Spirit on those who interpret and apply the laws of the land in this area. I am deeply grateful to Bishop Thomas O'Brien for his perseverance in extending the invitation to come to Phoenix. He has been a very good friend since we went to Rome together in 1987 to prepare for the pastoral visit of the Holy Father to the United States later that year, a visit which brought him here to Phoenix as well as to other spots along the way, where he met with representatives of other Churches and faith families.

Before reflecting on the word of God, I do want to comment on the ties which link the Diocese of Phoenix to Baltimore. A word about Baltimore itself: at the time that our first cathedral was begun in 1806, there was only one diocesan bishop in the United States, Bishop John Carroll of Baltimore. His jurisdiction included the original 13 states, the Northwest Territory, and in his capacity as Apostolic Administrator of the Diocese of New Orleans, also the territory of the Louisiana Purchase. Some 35 of the present States of the Union were therefore linked to him.

From 1790 to 1810, Bishop Carroll was the only diocesan bishop in the United States. In 1810, new bishops were ordained in Baltimore for Philadelphia, Boston and Bardstown, Kentucky, with Archbishop Carroll as the principal consecrating bishop. The first Bishop of New York was ordained in Rome but died in Naples in 1810.

When Arizona was under the jurisdiction of Santa Fe, it is good to note that the first two Archbishops of Santa Fe journeyed to Baltimore to participate in Plenary Councils there. In this role, they helped to reestablish bonds of unity between the North and South following the Civil War and, in the Plenary Council of 1884, to lay the groundwork for a new catechism,

called *The Baltimore Catechism*, and the establishment of The Catholic University of America.

The Gospel text we've just heard is so familiar that we may have lost sight of its revolutionary character. The implications of Jesus' injunction to render unto Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's, have been working themselves out for two millennia. And during that time, Christians have never been able to agree on precisely what the theological nuances of that text are, nor what its practical applications might be. Some have taken it as a mandate for a radical withdrawal from the world. Others have developed what they describe as a "two kingdoms" social ethic. Someone, somewhere, somehow, is undoubtedly using *Matthew 22* to justify a flat-rate income tax! But amidst this disagreement, I think virtually everyone would agree that the gospel story of Caesar's coin teaches two things that have had a decisive — or to use that loaded word again, "revolutionary" — impact on both the Church and the world.

The first thing to notice about the text is that Jesus gives Caesar his due. He does not deny Caesar's authority. Nor did the early Christian Church deny Caesar's authority, even when Caesar's agent, Pontius Pilate, crucified the early Church's Lord. The First Letter of Peter in the New Testament, which biblical scholars tell us reflects an early Christian baptismal sermon, instructs the newly-baptized to "be subject for the Lord's sake to every human institution, whether it be to the emperor as supreme, or to the governors sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to praise those who do right" (*1 Peter* 2.13-14). Similarly, St. Paul instructed the Christians of Rome to "be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God" (*Romans* 13.1). In a word: Caesar is not to be denied what is rightly his.

But the second crucial thing to notice about this text (and its parallels in *Mark* and *Luke*) is that Jesus, by juxtaposing Caesar and God, de-sacralizes the emperor — and thus declares that fidelity to God is the first order of business. As I've just noted, St. Paul drew out the implications of this some years later, by writing to the Romans that there are no legitimate things-of-Caesar's that are not Caesar's, in the final analysis, by reason of *God's* authority. Because God is God, Caesar is not God. And if Caesar attempts to occupy the ground that properly belongs to God, Caesar must be resisted — out of fidelity to God, *and* out of a commitment to the right ordering of society. A Caesar who makes himself God is very unlikely to be a Caesar who

promotes justice, freedom, order, equality, or other social goods.

The Gospel story of Caesar's coin has had a profound impact on the history of the West. When the Church resisted imperial and then royal absolutism, insisting on the right to order its own internal life and to provide for its own pastoral leadership, it did so in fidelity to the Lord's injunction in the Gospel we have just read. The Church's resistance to royal absolutism helped create the social space on which free societies could emerge in Europe — and thus the Church had an important, if indirect, influence on the emergence of modern democracy. In the long view of history, the democracy under which we live today did not begin with the speculations of John Locke; its deeper roots may be found in Pope Gregory VII's 11th century contest with the emperor Henry IV, and in the determination of even earlier popes to preserve the Church's freedom of action in the face of expansive imperial claims. Contrary to a lot of mythology, the Church, by insisting that there were limits to Caesar's reach, promoted the social pluralism from which democracy eventually emerged.

More recently, this Gospel text influenced the collapse of European communism, especially in Poland. In May 1953, the Polish communist regime tried to implement a decree giving the state the authority to appoint and remove priests and bishops; all clergy, of whatever rank, were also to be required to take a loyalty oath to the Polish People's Republic. It was, in short, a decree aimed at making the Church a wholly owned subsidiary of the Polish state.

Cardinal Stefan Wyszynski, who had tried skillfully to reach a *modus vivendi* with the communist government for five years, now chose the path of confrontation. In a historic sermon at Warsaw's St. John's Cathedral, he threw down this gauntlet: "We teach that it is proper to render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God that which is God's. But when Caesar seats himself on the altar, we respond curtly: he may not." Later, under the cardinal's leadership, the entire Polish episcopate issued a declaration that concluded with words of bold defiance: "We are not allowed to place the things of God on the altar of Caesar. *Non possumus!* [We cannot!]. (Andrzej Micewski, *Cardinal Wyszynski: A Biography*, 1984, p. 116) Not we *shall* not. Not, "we don't think this is appropriate." We *cannot*.

Cardinal Wyszynski's heroism cost him his freedom for three years. But he successfully defended the independence of the Church, and thus laid

the groundwork for the resistance that would eventually take the form of the Solidarity movement in 1980. Those men and women whose courage we admired at the shipyard gates in Gdansk in 1980 were men and women who had learned the truth about God, about Caesar, and about themselves from the Church led by Cardinal Wyszyński.

There is much more to all this, of course, than rallying one's troops.

If Caesar is not God, then political life is not the place where we look for ultimate meaning. Political life is important. Indeed, political life, and the law that gives texture and structure to political life, is vital. But it is not *ultimate*. And because it is not ultimate, politics, rightly understood, *cannot* be totalitarian politics.

By de-sacralizing Caesar, Jesus de-sacralized politics — which is very important for *politics*, and especially for *democratic* politics and law. Sacral politics, which are frequently utopian politics, inevitably become violent politics. By de-sacralizing the world of politics while giving it its proper and due respect, the Church helps clear the social space on which a politics of persuasion — a politics of law — can be built.

Because Caesar isn't God, civil society is possible

Because Caesar isn't God, the state is the servant of society, not the other way around.

Because Caesar isn't God, we can be citizens of a constitutional, democratic state.

Thank God that Caesar isn't God. Thank God that God is God.

Thinking about this familiar Gospel text in these terms may also help bring into focus this past summer's controversy over the Pledge of Allegiance. It is curious that there are judges who make the radical secularization of the American public square their goal, in defiance of both the will of the people and the decisions of legislatures. There is no point in trying to defend or even to explain them. What I am interested in doing is meeting a far more interesting objection: namely, the objection that the phrase, "under God," in the Pledge smacks of the kind of spiritual pride that can lead to national disaster.

The Catholic answer to that argument is — that’s right: spiritual pride *is* a temptation. It’s always a temptation, perhaps more so at a time when the United States is the world’s only superpower.

If we understand it correctly, though, the phrase “under God” in the pledge does not smack of arrogance. Quite the contrary: the phrase “under God” is a confession of humility that reflects the teaching of Jesus in today’s Gospel.

For to say that this is a nation “under God” is to confess that we are a nation under judgment. To say that we are a nation “under God” is to acknowledge that the justice of our laws is measured by a higher law — the moral law. To say that this is a nation “under God” is to commit ourselves to weighing questions of public policy, not simply by criteria of utility, but by nobler standards: do the policies being proposed reflect and enhance the inalienable dignity and value of the human person? Finally, to pledge our loyalties to a nation “under God” means to hold ourselves accountable to a higher standard than national self-aggrandizement in our dealings with other nations. A nation “under God” is a nation that is accepting a broader responsibility for justice, order, freedom, and peace on the international plane. This applies, quite evidently, as we American bishops pointed out recently, to the possibility of war against Iraq.

If we are not “under judgment,” as individuals and as a nation, then the way we live is without consequence. Without a sense of obligation that transcends the here and now, what we do with, or to, ourselves has no real bearing on anything. Individuals are born and die; so do nations. So what? That cynical, and ultimately despairing, view of the human condition, of politics, and of law is what’s implied by the claim that we are not a nation “under God” — under judgment.

The de-sacralization of Caesar implies the de-sacralization of politics — and this is a crucial barrier against the temptation, built into the structure of the modern state, to expand infinitely the reach of its coercive power. When a pious grandmother in New York insists that the state cannot mandate teaching sexual techniques to primary school children; when Cardinal Wyszyński and the Polish bishops said “We *cannot*” to a communist government; when your patron, St. Thomas More, chose the truth over the demands of King Henry VIII; when Pope Gregory VII faced down the Holy

Roman Emperor Henry IV and Thomas Becket resisted King Henry II — in all these instances, we can find echoes of the confrontation between Jesus and his critics on this matter of God and Caesar and their relationship.

Politics and law are very, very important. But politics and law are not, *ultimately*, important. They do not say the last word. Only God and God's Kingdom have ultimate, final importance. But knowing that makes democratic politics and just law possible. When Christianity says that politics is penultimate, it contributes to the ongoing task of making space in society for democracy.

Indeed, if by “politics” we mean what Aristotle meant — deliberating *together* on the question, “How *ought* we to live together?” — then the Christian insistence that politics is penultimate helps make genuine *politics*, the politics of persuasion and law, possible.

In the context of this Red Mass we do gather together before the Lord in our human weakness and brokenness. Our being together in this church setting helps us to look up together to the One who will utter the ultimate word of judgment for each one of us, the same One who meanwhile offers us an abundant measure of the compassion no human court can match. Let us turn to the Lord to plead that the words written in Deuteronomy may come alive for us – words Roman Catholics prayed Saturday night in the Night Prayer of the Liturgy of the Hours, words familiar to so many of all faith traditions: “The Lord is our God, the Lord alone! Therefore, you shall love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength. Take to heart these words which I enjoin on you today. Drill them into your children. Speak of them at home and abroad, whether you are busy or at rest.” (Deuteronomy 6:4-7) If we accept God's gift of strength to act in this way, we shall have the answer to the question, “How ought we to live together?”

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