

The Double-Headed Eagle

A teaching from Bishop Robert Pipta

I can barely recall being in first grade when I started serving at the altar at my Byzantine Catholic parish. Perhaps I was a bit young, but the “older boys” guided me and were usually quite patient in teaching me the altar serving responsibilities, helping me to mature until I was able to be “head server.”

I believe God was already planting the seeds of my priestly vocation at this early age. When in fourth grade and approaching my tenth birthday, I wrote in an assigned autobiography project, “When I grow up, I am going to be a *priest* (sic).”

At this young age, the seeds of my vocation were nurtured at the parish in two ways: first, in my growing love for the Liturgy of our Byzantine Catholic Church (beyond the initial fascinations of boys such as burning candles and smoking incense); and, second, by seeing in the priests who served my home parish of Annunciation in Anaheim, California actual role-models I could look up to.

Forty years later finding myself well into the ministry of priestly formation by serving as rector of our Byzantine Catholic Seminary in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, I often thought how important it was to imagine each seminarian’s capacity to be a role model to devoted youngsters. Reflecting on this, I was grateful for the significance of various dimensions of priestly formation such as emotional intelligence, interpersonal relating skills, basic human propriety and maturity, and the various spiritual and pastoral qualities needed in our pastoral leaders.

As crucial as it is for me and all clergy to be strong in these characteristics, I journey through life in this world with a hope that all leaders – monastic, workplace, governmental, parental, educational – respect these characteristics and humbly strive to grow more perfect in such attributes. When leaders in our world live according to a rejection of the teachings of our Lord Jesus Christ or even with a rejection of the reality of God, such hopes seem much more elusive.

While countless specific denominations are represented by the people of our society, we can arrive at a singular Godly worldview when we strive to live in sincerity and with good will. We actually speak to this vision in the Our Father each time we ask the Heavenly Father to make on earth what is in heaven: “Thy Kingdom come, Thy Will be done, on earth *as* it is in heaven.” Ironically, as common as this prayer is, we too often neglect connecting this poignant part of the prayer with our sense of citizenship as Christians.

Double-Headed Eagle

Our Byzantine Christian tradition matured in a Christian society. The image of the double-headed eagle came to represent this. It was the official state symbol of the late Byzantine Empire and

symbolized the unity between the Byzantine Christian Church and the State. The Empire was governed by the principle of *Symphonia* or *Synallelia* which means a "symphony" between the civil and the ecclesiastical functions of Christian society. In the same way that the human person is constituted of a soul and body, so was the Empire with the Church as the soul and the state as the body.

While our American democracy is different from this, our society remains in need of a soul. The First Amendment of the Bill of Rights states that "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof." While we may summarize this as "separation of church and state," it is to our country's demise to interpret it as "separation of God and state." Put another way, there is a vast difference between "freedom of religion" and "freedom from religion." False interpretations of "separation of church and state" are used increasingly today as weapons to suppress the Church's influence and God's influence in what is supposed to be a free society.

As organized religion becomes increasingly out of vogue, we actually might be witnessing a death experience in our society as the "soul" leaves the "body." This is because the Church is a real and living organism in our world and the Church and state subsist in each other. They are interdependent.

While the Church can offer neither support for nor opposition against any political party or candidate, and while Catholic clergy are forbidden from being actively involved in political life (and must remain non-combatants in armed conflict), the Church has the responsibility of being a voice of truth and peace especially amid current frustrations arising from false media and hyper-partisanship.

This voice becomes incarnate through the faithful citizenship of voting Catholics. Patriotism demands that American adults embrace the right and responsibility of voting. This demand is of particular importance to those of Christian faith if our society is not to lose its soul.

The United States Catholic bishops, in "Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship," (Part I, #9) state that the "obligation to participate in shaping the moral character of society is a requirement of our faith. It is a basic part of the mission we have received from Jesus Christ, who offers a vision of life revealed to us in Sacred Scripture and Tradition.... Our faith helps us understand that the pursuit of a civilization of love must address our own failures and the ways in which these failures distort the broader ordering of the society in which we live."

Citizenship in Heaven

While the Church has an important and necessary place in our society, it is the baptized person's citizenship in heaven that far outweighs any other national citizenship. When considering the jewel of the parables (Luke 15: 11-32), Saint Gregory of Nyssa teaches us that the Prodigal Son "would not confess himself to be a sinner against heaven if he were not convinced that the homeland he had left at the time of his going astray were not in actual fact heaven."

The baptized Christian has as his primary citizenship heaven – plain and simple. No external force can ever deny the Christian of this citizenship. It is only the person’s own choices and actions that jeopardize such citizenship.

Choosing a particular candidate for whom to vote in an election is often a difficult task for faithful Christians. It’s hardly the case that any candidate’s platform ever perfectly conforms to the tenants of our faith. The Church accepts as permissible voting in a manner that represents the hope of moving our society closer to the observance of gospel precepts. A vote, for example, that is motivated by hope for a reduction in abortions is permissible when no alternative is seen that could likely end abortion.

More and more people these days avoid declaring a particular political party or don’t vote in primary elections. It’s at this level of voting, however, that a greater number of candidates can be considered. While many of us find it difficult to embrace certain platforms in each of the political parties, avoiding political participation at this primary level can result in little hope for the ballot’s inclusion of a candidate who may move our society closer to Christ’s teachings.

The United States Catholic bishops guide us in this way: “A Catholic cannot vote for a candidate who favors a policy promoting an intrinsically evil act, such as abortion, euthanasia, assisted suicide, deliberately subjecting workers or the poor to subhuman living conditions, redefining marriage in ways that violate its essential meaning, or racist behavior, if the voter's intent is to support that position. In such cases, a Catholic would be guilty of formal cooperation in grave evil.” (Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship; Part I, #34)

Heaven on Earth

Heavenly citizenship demands that one take seriously the need to grow the reality of heaven on earth. Our ultimate experience of this in the world is the church temple itself. The Byzantine Christian temple is designed to bring us into the heavenly realm and then to send us forth in peace and in the name of the Lord.

The formal public worship of the lay faithful occurs in the nave of the church. The narthex (or vestibule) is a place we move through to transition from the earthly to the heavenly. Church narthexes fittingly have announcement boards, literature, sign-up sheets, and other items that are fitting to our witnessing the kingdom in the world. The church nave, however, should be the place limited to the praise of God, the reception of His holy mysteries, the proclamation of His word, and the iconographic windows into heaven. Save very particular occasions such as liturgical services for those who serve or have served our country, the nave is not an appropriate place for the American flag or any other flags, banners, or posters that are not iconographic windows into heaven.

Even when we make our tithes to God inside the church, the fact that American currency still includes the words “In God we trust” reminds us that our first reliance, our first trust, and our first hope is in God and his heavenly kingdom.

Conscience of Society

Missionary discipleship, when truly Christian, should help form the conscience of our society person by person.

The Fathers of the Second Vatican Council (The Church in the Modern World, #16) teach us that “conscience reveals that law which is fulfilled by love of God and neighbor. In fidelity to conscience, Christians are joined with the rest of man in the search for truth, and for the genuine solution to the numerous problems which arise in the life of individuals and from social relationships.”

Saint Dorotheus of Gaza (6th Century) reminds us that “the conscience is something divine, a hot and bright spark breathed into man by God, which lights up the mind and shows him the difference between right and wrong.”

It’s not uncommon today to find people equating the spiritual to the affective. Many are led to embrace the idea that if it feels right then it is right. Where God resides in our hearts and where that divine spark is guiding us to the truth is at a human level even deeper than our feelings. Conscience, therefore, is not merely a feeling but a judgment of reason which is God’s Word penetrating the human heart by the power of the Holy Spirit. Our obligation to have properly formed consciences is not fulfilled simply by attending to what feels right or feels good.

At the same time, we must remember that in the media sound bites rarely help in forming our consciences. Social media creates an echo chamber of polemics, often using amoral algorithms. Without time for more complete study and thoughtfulness, we can be easily coerced by thoughtless media posts. For those who accept the existence of God, it should be naturally accepted that the Church’s work is to teach reality as opposed to ideology.

Consciences are formed with the mind of Christ and by the power of the Holy Spirit. When individuals take seriously the forming of the conscience through study, prayer, and reflection, they become a leaven in society, lifting-up the soul of the community to its rightful place under God.

Religious Freedom

Acting according to our God-formed consciences can be a true martyrdom in those parts of the world where religious liberty is not respected. In 2024, the Catholic Church observes Religious Freedom Week from the 22nd to the 29th of June. The theme for this year’s observance is “Called to the Fullness of Dignity.” These days include the final week of the Apostle’s Fast in the Byzantine Christian tradition.

During this time, Catholics pray and act each day for religious freedom which is being increasingly threatened throughout the world. Acting for religious freedom is accomplished when we remember our primary citizenship as Christians in the Kingdom of Heaven. Regarding prayer, I recall reading the words of a holy man who said that we are educated for heavenly citizenship by means of the liturgical services of the Church. We are ineffective in witnessing to religious liberty if we feel obliged more to a political party than to God and His teachings. We must constantly search our consciences and ask if our beliefs are more political than religious.

Protection and Nurturing of Human Life

Vice President Hubert H. Humphrey was remembered as saying, “The ultimate moral test of any government is the way it treats three groups of its citizens. First, those in the dawn of life – our children. Second, those in the shadows of life – our needy, our sick, our handicapped. Third, those in the twilight of life – our elderly.”

It is in the family that God’s plan for nurturing, helping, and protecting the vulnerable has been established. Saint John Chrysostom viewed the family as a “domestic Church” or little Church where the husband and wife have the grave responsibility of imaging on earth the love of God for his people. This love is for all of God’s people and not only a select few.

This is precisely why so many of the non-negotiables for Catholics when it comes to living according to our faith in society involve human life, human dignity, the nurturing and protecting of God’s human creation, parenting, and the family.

Catholics must vote according to their properly formed consciences and with an understanding of the intrinsic evils of abortion, assisted suicide, euthanasia, embryonic stem cell research, human cloning, human trafficking, and same-sex marriages.

Applying the principle of subsidiarity to the family makes parents the first educators of their children. Catholic parents must be given the ability to fulfill their duty of choosing schools that will best help them in their responsibilities of forming and educating their children.

“The family based on marriage between a man and a woman is the first and fundamental unit of society and is a sanctuary for the creation and nurturing of children. It should be defended and strengthened, not redefined, undermined, or further distorted.” (Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship; Part I, #46)

Catholic bishops also remind us that abortion remains the pre-eminent priority in the protection of human life as it directly attacks the most vulnerable and destroys more than a million lives per year in the U.S.

Conclusion

Voting is the “confessional moment” of civic participation and responsibility. Conscientious Catholic voters do their part in maintaining the soul in society. The current climate of intense polarization is due to a clash in worldviews, not simply a difference in policies as in those times when politics was more polite. The false compartmentalization and dichotomy of the sacred and secular spheres of church and state in America have been so successfully warped into the American consciousness that fasting and prayer remain powerful and at our disposal for the hope that our heavenly citizenship can impact life in this world.

Remembering the words of Pope Francis that we can seek “a better kind of politics, one truly at the service of the common good” (*Fratelli Tutti*, no. 154), I ask my parish priests to use the U.S.C.C.B. resource – *A Better Kind of Politics. Civilize It* – for their parish bulletins and see that the nave and sanctuary of their churches truly shine forth with the reality of heaven on earth.

In closing I ask that you join me in praying that the Lord remember in His Kingdom all world leaders, and that He speak peace and blessings in their hearts for His holy Church and her liberty, and for all people from womb to tomb, in order that we may live a calm, peaceful and loving life in all piety and holiness.

Grant this, O Lord.

+Robert
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