

Thoughts from *Render Unto Caesar*:
Serving the Nation by Living Our Catholic Beliefs in the Political Life
by Frank Caliva

Discussions about politics and public life are often tricky, as many young people have strong opinions that reflect the deep political divisions in our country. Discussions can quickly turn emotional, and disagreements can move almost without warning from the abstract to the personal.

Nevertheless, it is important for youth ministers to address our faith and public life, for at least two reasons. First, we live in the shadow of our nation's capital, and political awareness is incredibly high among teens in the Diocese of Arlington. Second, and more importantly, this discussion is important because the act of participating in our own governance is not just a political right or a civic duty – it's a moral responsibility.¹

In 2008, during the hotly contested presidential election, the Most Rev. Charles J. Chaput, Archbishop of Denver, wrote a small but powerful book entitled, [*Render Unto Caesar*](#). The book explores the complex relationship between our Catholic creed and our political beliefs.

The idea that there is *any* relationship between faith and politics makes a lot of people, particularly in modern day America, very nervous. We have a long and proud tradition of religious freedom and tolerance in the United States, and this is a good thing. But in our concern about preventing one religion from dominating, perhaps we have gone to the other extreme, in which faith is entirely excluded from public life. Archbishop Chaput argues that this does not make a lot of sense if we take our faith seriously:

People who take God seriously will not remain silent about their faith. They will often disagree about doctrine or policy but they won't be quiet. They can't be... Obviously the common good demands a respect for other people with different beliefs and a willingness to compromise whenever possible. But for Catholics, the common good can never mean muting themselves in public debate on foundational issues of faith or human dignity. Christian faith is always personal, but never private.²

Ultimately, how we choose to act in the public sphere is up to us, as adults in our society, and in our faith, who act according to the dictates of our conscience. As Catholics, of course, we are obligated to *form* our consciences according to the teachings of the faith. The following page contains some suggestions how to approach conscience formation for Catholic young people to help them prepare to live as active citizens in a participatory, democratic society.

Outline of Key Principles [With Interaction Suggestions]

1. Citizens should take an active part in public life. This participation may vary from one country to another, but the Church recognizes and regards as praiseworthy systems that provide political freedom and opportunities for citizen engagement.³

2. The Church teaches that legitimate authorities in society should be respected, that the law should be obeyed and taxes paid, and that public responsibilities like military service, jury duty, and holding elected office, should be carried out.

3. The world is not perfect, but it is our special calling as lay Catholic men and women to make the world a better place that is more faithful to the Gospel. The Church views civic affairs as the responsibility of the laity. It is up to society's legitimate authority to make day-to-day decisions on how we should live.

4. The key phrase, however, is *legitimate authority*. Not all authority is legitimate, not all laws are just, and not all leaders should be obeyed. **[Interaction: Have students brainstorm historical figures and laws that we might consider immoral and illegitimate.]**

5. The question is, though, by what standard do we judge who holds legitimate authority, and which laws are just? This is where the Church *does* have a role to play. In Matthew's Gospel, chapter 22:15-21, Jesus talks very briefly about legitimate civil authority **[Interaction: Have student read this "Render unto Caesar" passage on the previous page.]**

6. This passage from Matthew (22:15-21) reveals that the source of legitimate authority is God. Law that is not fundamentally based on God's law, on the "natural law", will be illegitimate. There is plenty of room for legitimate disagreements on things like Social Security, building bridges and roads, even on more serious issues like economic sanctions, immigration, and war. However, when human laws are in direct contradiction to God's law, Catholic Christians have a moral responsibility to work to rectify this incongruity.

7. Most of the time, taking our faith seriously may just mean voting against politicians who express views that violate human dignity. Sometimes, it requires more decisive action, like those who practiced civil disobedience against the racist Jim Crow laws during the civil rights movement. Rarely, living our faith in the public square might mean an even greater sacrifice – giving up our lives. **[Interaction: Show clip from *A Man from All Seasons*, in which Thomas More explains to the court that has just convicted him of treason that his conscience demands that he follow God's law over the King's when the two are in contradiction.]**

Special Section – For Election Years

[Interaction: Have students brainstorm what are the most important issues facing voters in the upcoming election.]

1. The Church has a lot to say on social justice issues and issues of war and peace. To be honest, neither of our two main political parties "gets it all right" – there are moral problems with the policy platforms of both parties. **[Interaction: Have young people suggest issues that political parties might "get wrong" through the lens of our faith.]**

2. The Church acknowledges that ultimately it is up to the civil authorities to develop solutions to these types of problems. We live in an imperfect world, and politics is the “art of the possible” – we have to compromise, make sacrifices, and sometimes settle for a less-than-perfect outcome.

3. On some issues, however, our bishops, whose authority comes from Jesus Himself, have said that Catholics in good conscience *cannot* compromise.

There are some things we must never do, as individuals or as a society, because they are always incompatible with love of God and neighbor. Such actions are so deeply flawed that they are always opposed to the authentic good of persons. These are called “intrinsically evil” actions. They must always be rejected and opposed and must never be supported or condoned.⁴

4. The Church views the right to life as the most fundamental right a human being has, the right upon which all other rights are based. Thus, bishops around the country, in their duty as the primary moral teachers of Catholics, have said that Catholics must consider protecting the right to life for all humans beings, born and unborn, as our first concern. **[Interaction: Have young people read the second sentence – “We hold these truths...” – of the Declaration of Independence and discuss the fundamental values of that document.]**

5. This can seem frustrating, because it appears the bishops are telling Catholics how to vote. This is more a fault of our political system, which limits us to only two real choices in most national elections. In the larger picture, however, what the bishops are saying is no different from what St. Thomas More, and Jesus Himself said – we must be good citizens of our country, but we must be citizens of God’s Kingdom first.

6. Ultimately, voting is up to us – the Church will not be in the voting booth with us, making sure we make the right decision. But we need to remember that voting is not just a political act; it is a moral one as well.

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¹ "Participation" is the voluntary and generous engagement of a person in social interchange. It is necessary that all participate, each according to his position and role, in promoting the common good. This obligation is inherent in the dignity of the human person. (CCC 1913)

² *Render Unto Caesar*, p. 10.

³ "One must pay tribute to those nations whose systems permit the largest possible number of the citizens to take part in public life in a climate of genuine freedom." (CCC 1915)

⁴ U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, [Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship](#), paragraph 22.