

The Two Cities: Divided Loyalties and Disturbed Comfort

February 21, 2016

Second Sunday of Lent
Readings: Genesis 15.5-12, 17-18;
Philippians 3.17-4.1; Luke 9.28-36**By Rev. Joseph Koterski, S.J.**

In an election year it is no surprise that much of the news is dominated by politics. We expect to find candidates jockeying for position and political parties ratcheting up the rhetoric. The shrill tones of this year's contest, however, are disturbing. If one believed all one heard, one would think Armageddon is around the corner. But even to survey the current situation with a more critical eye is discomfiting. What is a faithful Catholic to think? What should be the response from the pulpit? Should the Church weigh in on these things in some way?

The second reading of today's Mass rightly turns our thoughts to a nonnegotiable aspect of the Christian take on politics in any age. St. Paul writes: "For many . . . conduct themselves as enemies of the cross of Christ. . . . Their minds are occupied with earthly things. But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a savior, the Lord Jesus Christ."

A Helpful Distinction

Reflecting on passages like this, St. Augustine articulated the doctrine of the two cities: the heavenly city and the earthly city. He also took inspiration from the conversation in the gospel where Peter asked Jesus about the legitimacy of paying taxes to Caesar and Our Lord gave his memorable guidance: "Render unto Caesar what is Caesar's, and unto God what is God's." Christian theologians ever since Augustine have found crucial insights in this distinction. For Augustine, a city is defined by its loyalties, by the order of the loves that citizens hold in common. His distinction gives Christians exactly the sort of demarcation that we need in order to think about the legitimate demands of the state, and at the same time to remember that we have higher loyalties: to God above all, but also to the Church and to our families.

In his *City of God* Augustine distinguishes between the citizenship that we have in the heavenly city, even while we still live on this earth, and the citizenship that we have in the earthly city, whatever the form of government and whatever the degree of justice, order, and sanity it shows. Admittedly, in the course of history there have been Christians who have longed for a land entirely their own, a land like the one promised by God to the patriarchs of Israel, where there would be no such distinction. According to the prophets, however, the chosen people all too quickly forgot God while living in that land. They needed to be taken into the Babylonian Exile to be reminded of the purpose of the land they had been given. The gift was not simply to provide them with freedom from control by others, but to give them liberty for true worship of the one God, for the keeping of his commandments, and for living in the charity prescribed by the Holiness Code of Leviticus.

In heeding the words of Jesus about what we need to render to God and what we need to render to Caesar, Christians have from the beginning accepted, at least in principle, the legitimacy of secular authority. There are times when wicked regimes have had to be overturned and corrupt rulers deposed. But for the Christian these abuses of power did not render the autonomy of civil authority illegitimate in principle.

Over the centuries, Christians have managed to live under diverse regimes and in widely different circumstances. By the aid of concepts like Augustine's two cities, they have understood that they need to be citizens of both cities. It would be so much simpler, one might think, if we belonged only to one and did not have to worry about divided loyalties. But we do. And we can continue to handle the problems that come with divided loyalties, so long as we remember which loyalties are higher when they come into conflict.

Preaching about Controversy

Under the best of circumstances, the earthly city – not only the various legal jurisdictions under which we dwell (the school district, the city, the state, the federal government), but also the various forms of earthly culture in which we live (our social circles, the entertainment world, the media, our country, the larger world) – will be well-organized communities, helpfully supportive of our higher loyalties to God, to the Church, to our families.

But we seldom live under the best of circumstances. For this reason, we need to have a strategy suited to our own times. We are indeed blessed in that we do not live under the dire straits of tyranny. There may be reason to fear that the watchful eyes of a technologically astute Big Brother will only get worse and make liberty impossible. But many generations of Christians have had it far worse.

In the recent controversies about religious liberty, it has become clear that we Catholics understand that our religion necessarily consists not only of true worship but also of various forms of social charity. What we so much value about the Constitution of this country is its guarantee of the free exercise of religion. And we must continue to defend not just legal protection for our places of worship, but freedom to practice our religion in all its aspects. We need the liberty to run our institutions – schools, hospitals, adoption agencies, and systems for the care of the poor such as Catholic Charities – under the teachings of Christ.

Up against pressures from the earthly city, we may be strongly tempted to keep our creature comforts untroubled, to go along in order to get along. We can be quite sure, however, that taking this course would mean yielding on things that we ought never to yield. The sophistication of the forces that want to have our loyalty may well make their compulsions subtle. There may not be open persecution. As we have seen in the recent history of social changes in this country, the drumbeat is slow but steady. Abortion, euthanasia, physician-assisted suicide, same-sex marriage, gender reconstruction surgery, legally enforced surrogacy. There is no reason to think we are at the end of the line.

What then is the pastor who wants to follow the example of the Good Shepherd to do? One strong temptation facing us will be to go off half-cocked. But ranting and raving from the pulpit will help no more than the ranting and raving we see on television. Doing so puts our people at even graver risk, for it marginalizes the voice of the Church in the ears of our congregations.

The other grave temptation will be to play the ostrich and bury our heads in the sand. But keeping every homily on a safe topic and never on a controversial one does not resemble in the slightest the advice and the conduct of our Master. Doing so leaves our people without any guidance from the Church on the issues that trouble them and on which we need to remember the proper order of our loyalties.

Prudence and Tax-Exempt Status

What then is the preacher to do? Even if we can truthfully say that we would personally be prepared to speak out and not to hide behind the pulpit, we need to be prudent. Does not the current state of American law and the tax-exempt status of our churches require that we confine our advice to conversations that are off the record – at bingo games and in coffee shops? To be sure, we dare not miss those opportunities! But how about homilies and sermons?

The regulations governing the tax-exempt status of our churches require that we not engage in *partisan politics*. Whatever stand-alone church and store-front preachers may get away with, we are not permitted to lobby for or against particular candidates or to direct our remarks for or against specific political parties.

But we may – and to be real shepherds after Jesus’ heart, we *must* – speak about current issues, even about specific policies and legislative proposals and court decisions. This is not forbidden by the regulations governing tax exemption, and it seems morally required by the duties of our pastoral office, especially when we remember the challenges our people face in the conflicts of loyalty that are endemic to holding citizenship in both of the two cities.

What many of us have found to be helpful in rendering our congregations better disposed to hearing a Catholic perspective on pressing matters and controversial issues is to frame our words carefully before we get to substantive matters. It can help to remind our congregations about the difference between discussing questions of morality and policy, on the one hand, and engaging in partisan politics, on the other. Even a brief mention of Augustine’s doctrine of the two cities can help, for it allows us rather directly to raise the question of divided loyalties and the need always to protect what matters most. When we do this, we honor what today’s passage from the Letter to the Philippians calls “our citizenship in heaven” and what Our Lord commanded when he spoke of rendering to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God.

About the Author

Rev. Joseph Koterski, S.J. teaches philosophy at Fordham University. Among his recent publications is An Introduction to Medieval Philosophy: Some Basic Concepts (2009). He has produced lecture courses on Aristotle’s Ethics, on Natural Law and Human Nature, and most recently on Biblical Wisdom Literature for The Teaching Company, and courses on Spiritual Theology and on John Paul II’s Veritatis splendor for the International Catholic University.

FOR FURTHER READING

John Paul II, Augustinum Hipponensum, available at:
https://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_letters/1986

Rev. James Schall, S.J., “On Building an Earthly City,” available at:
<http://www.catholicity.com/commentary/schall/08603.html>

United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, “Political Activity Guidelines,” available at:
<http://www.usccb.org/about/general-counsel/political-activity-guidelines.cfm>

United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, “Religious Liberty FAQs,” available at:
<http://www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/religious-liberty/religious-liberty-faqs.cfm>

IN SHORT . . .

- ***Some Christians have longed for their own land, like the one promised to the patriarchs of Israel, but the chosen people all too quickly forgot God while living in that land.***
- ***We can continue to handle the problems that come with divided loyalties, so long as we remember which loyalties are higher when they come into conflict.***
- ***Under the best of circumstances, the earthly city will be well-organized and supportive of our higher loyalties to God, to the Church, to our families.***
- ***We must continue to defend the freedom to practice our religion in all its aspects, so that we may run our institutions under the teachings of Christ.***
- ***The regulations governing the tax-exempt status of our churches require that preachers not engage in partisan politics.***
- ***But we can and must speak about controversial issues, especially given the challenges our people face in the conflicts of loyalties to the earthly city and to the heavenly city.***