

29th Sunday in Ordinary Time (A)  
(Isaiah 45:1.4-6 / Matthew 22:15-21)  
18.10.2020

*Politics & Religion: the Common Good*

Today our Sunday readings invite us to reflect on a very important and sensitive issue: politics.

Beside God and Jesus, Cyrus and Caesar are the two supporting characters of our stories. They were two pagan political leaders who were made part of God's plan for his people.

The amazing thing is that Cyrus did not believe in the God of Israel and Caesar did not recognise Jesus as the Messiah. Yet at a precise moment in history God used two pagan leaders but even more important for us today is that God acknowledged the role of politics in the fabric of society and the independence of politics from the religious sphere.

So while we may rejoice when politicians claim to be Christians, it is clear that the first requirement for a person to be deemed good politician is not their belonging to a particular Church but that they possess the competence, the dedication and the integrity necessary for the accomplishment of their task. They must have at heart the desire to contribute to the common good. That is their main duty and responsibility, the whole reason of their existence (cf. St John XXIII, *Pacem in Terris*, n. 54). Pope Francis stated very clearly that "the dignity of each human person and the pursuit of the common good are concerns which ought to shape all economic policies." (*Evangelium Vitae*, n. 203)

This notion of the "common good" is, according to Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI, "something which concerns the Church deeply" (*Deus Caritas Est*, n. 28) because it is about the good of all at every level of society. It is about the fact that none of us, no country, no social group can experience peace, justice and growth on their own, without others. I cannot be great if it leaves others small. As Pope Francis writes: "The principle of the common good [is] a summons to solidarity" (*Laudato Si*, n. 158). To care for the common good implies that we must be acutely aware that we are dependent on one another.

Because of the pervasive temptations of individualism and self-interest, one of the most pressing demands of the common good is the persistent conversion of hearts to the realization that we do not exist for ourselves.

Conversion of the heart is required of our politicians and of each one of us. The Brexit situation in the United Kingdom, the governments of the United States, of Russia or of China bear witness to the fact that some of our political leaders still think that they can make their country great again without contributing "widely and generously to the common good". St John Paul II reminded our political leaders that "if a nation were to succumb more or less deliberately to the temptation to close in upon itself (...), it would fall seriously short of its clear ethical duty." (*Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, n. 23)

At this stage it is important to say that it would be too easy to complain about our political leaders without mentioning the fact that we are responsible for them. We elected them. If the electorate is driven by an individualistic mindset, if we are still prisoners of an old tribal and narrow-minded vision of the world, if our hearts and minds have not been purified and set free from all forms of bigotry and racism, if others are enemies simply because they are different, if they are reduced to numbers and figures, considered to be useless and expendable because they are poor, then our elected representatives will put in place or support social structures which favour a small minority, they will exacerbate fears and build walls.

In our Gospel reading, we are told that Jesus is truthful and that he teaches God's way in accordance with the truth. The truth that we must live and the truth we must expect from our political representatives, be that at local or national levels, is that as human beings we are all made for communion. The flourishing of our countries, of our economy and cultures depends on our ability to dialogue with one another, to work together, to care for and to encourage each other.

All citizens, be they people of religion or of none, have the responsibility to shape the earthly city in unity and peace. As Christians, we have nothing else to do than to participate in this project, being, as the 2<sup>nd</sup> Vatican Council asks us, responsible for and dedicated to the common good (cf. *Gaudium et Spes*, n. 75).

Here in Northern Ireland, we are supposed to elect a new Stormont Assembly in May 2022. Many things will happen between now and then. Yet I dare to ask you today to reflect and think about what kind of society we want in our small part of the world.

At the beginning of his last encyclical Pope Francis writes: "Isolation and withdrawal into one's own interests are never the way to restore hope and bring about renewal. Rather, it is closeness; it is the culture of encounter. Isolation, no; closeness, yes. Culture clash, no; culture of encounter, yes." (*Fratelli Tutti*, n. 30)

Many in Northern Ireland declare that they are Christian, so we must ask ourselves: do we really care for the common good? Do we want to restore hope and bring about renewal in Northern Ireland? Are we going to elect men and women who will promote a culture of encounter and dialogue or men and women who will speak and act in ways that reinforce walls in our streets and in our hearts?

Together let us build a more fraternal and compassionate society. Here in Northern Ireland and in the whole world, as Pope Francis reminded us recently, "we cannot live without one another, or worse still, pitted against one another" (Address to the 75<sup>th</sup> Meeting of the General Assembly of the United Nations, 25.09.2020).