**Religion and Democracy**

St. Mary Men’s Ministry – July 11, 2015

**Overview:**

One week ago on July 4th we began the 240th year of our great nation, so we thought that the topic of Religion & Democracy would be fitting for our review and discussion. Albeit, it is a high controversial topic. The two topics that we are always supposed to avoid at cocktail parties are religion and politics, but in my view, what two topics are more important in our lives and define who we are? They are also the vehicles for defining what we are called to do as Catholics.

We could spend hours defining what we mean by Democracy (e.g., Ben Franklin stressed that we are a Republic, not a pure Democracy), but for today’s session, I simply mean the political system as defined by our founding fathers and the freedoms that accompany it. But I’ll touch on it a bit more later.

So many issues confront us as we evolve (or devolve) from a nation once considered founded on Judeo-Christian values to one that our current President proclaimed shortly after he took office that “We do not consider ourselves a Christian nation, or a Jewish Nation or a Muslim Nation.  We consider ourselves a nation of citizens who are bound by ideals and a set of values.” Ah, but where did those values come from? And what unites them across diverse religions and philosophies?

In his book, ***Render Unto Caesar: Serving the Nation by Living Our Catholic Beliefs in Political Life***”, published shortly before the 2008 election, **Archbishop Charles Chaput** of Philadelphiastates…

“We Christians are **IN** the world, but **not OF** the world (we often hear this and I always wondered what this really means and how it impacts me living in this world). Chaput clarifies this by saying that *“We belong to God, and our home is heaven. But we’re here for a reason: to* ***change*** *the world, for the sake of the world, in the name of Jesus Christ. The work belongs to* ***us****. And the idea that we can accomplish it without engaging in a hands-on way the laws, the structures, the public policies, the habits of mind, and the root causes that sustain injustice in our country is a* ***delusion****.”*

A few weeks ago Fr. Audette said that we need to become politically active to try to change the world for the better – e.g., by supporting pro-life candidates.

In short, the way that I like to interpret what Jesus meant when he said *“render unto Caesar”* is that each of is called to do what we can, to **personally** take care of our fellow man, not relegate it to a government – i.e., He did NOT say, render unto Caesar and let Caesar take care of the people. In my varied career, I once reported to one of the wealthiest men in the US. He never donated to charities – his rationale was that a.) he employed thousands of people and b.) he pays millions $ in taxes so the government does it for him. Maybe needless to say, he was one of the most miserable people that I ever met - always fearful, even paranoid about losing his money.

I highly recommend that you read Chaput’s book, especially in preparation for the upcoming presidential election.

**Thomas Merton** also supports this view. In a 1968 letter he states, *“…today more than ever, the Gospel commitment has political implications, because you cannot claim to be “for Christ” and espouse a political cause that implies callous indifference to the needs of millions of human beings and even cooperate in their destruction.”*

**Historical Perspective**

The founding of the United States of America took place in 1787 with the signing of the Constitution, which is a purely secular document. In relation to religion the Constitution states:

Article VI: Clause 3: The Senators and Representatives before mentioned, and the Members of the several State Legislatures, and all executive and judicial Officers, both of the United States and of the several States, shall be bound by Oath or Affirmation, to support this Constitution; but no religious Test shall ever be required as a Qualification to any Office or public Trust under the United States.

The Bill Of Rights was quickly amended to the Constitution in order to protect the rights of citizens because the original Constitution primarily just defined the powers of government. The third Article of the Bill of Rights (which became the first amendment) states:

*Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the government for a redress of grievances.*

There is often debate about what exactly the First Amendment means, however, in an 1802 [**letter to the Danbury Baptists**](http://www.loc.gov/loc/lcib/9806/danpre.html), **Thomas Jefferson** made clear that the purpose of the First Amendment was to establish a "wall of separation" between Church and State in order to protect individuals' right of conscience; he stated:

*that their legislature should "make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof," thus building a wall of separation between Church & State. Adhering to this expression of the supreme will of the nation in behalf of the rights of conscience, I shall see with sincere satisfaction the progress of those sentiments which tend to restore to man all his natural rights, convinced he has no natural right in opposition to his social duties.*

Yet today our government is threatening our **rights of conscience**, with trying to compel Catholic hospitals to perform abortions and offer Health Care that pays for abortions and abortifacients, and perhaps, at some point, perform homosexual marriages after the recent Supreme Court ruling.

Many people don’t know that after the Declaration of Independence most states still had established state religions – e.g., only Anglicans could join the Virginia colony; only Congregationalists in CT, until 1818. In these states you were a lesser citizen who paid extra taxes, could not hold public office, etc.. Even through the 20th century many areas in our country were still very anti-Catholic and anti-Jewish.

All 13 original colonies had some sort of Christian state religion, except Catholic. Maryland was the first state to allow members who believed in God, regardless of their religion, so is often seen as the first state that allowed Catholics.

[Father John Carroll](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Carroll_(bishop)) was confirmed by [Pope Pius VI](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pope_Pius_VI), on June 6, 1784, as Superior of the Missions in the United States, with power to give the sacrament of confirmation. This act established a [hierarchy](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Catholic_Church_hierarchy) in the United States. Because [Maryland](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Maryland) was one of the few regions of the new country that had a large Catholic element, the [Diocese of Baltimore](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Roman_Catholic_Archdiocese_of_Baltimore#History)[[14]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_Roman_Catholicism_in_the_United_States#cite_note-14) became the first diocese in the United States – on November 6, 1789

Historian [Arthur Schlesinger Sr.](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Arthur_Schlesinger_Sr.) has called Anti-Catholicism "the deepest-held bias in the history of the American people."[[](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Freedom_of_religion_in_the_United_States#cite_note-50)

Because many of the British colonists, such as the [Puritans](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Puritan) and [Congregationalists](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Congregational_church), were fleeing religious persecution by the Church of England, much of early American religious culture exhibited the more extreme anti-Catholic bias of these Protestant denominations. Monsignor [John Tracy Ellis](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Tracy_Ellis) wrote that a "universal anti-Catholic bias was brought to Jamestown in 1607 and vigorously cultivated in all the thirteen colonies from [Massachusetts](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Massachusetts) to [Georgia](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Georgia_(U.S._state))."[[51]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Freedom_of_religion_in_the_United_States#cite_note-51) Colonial charters and laws contained specific proscriptions against Roman Catholics. Monsignor Ellis noted that a common hatred of the Roman Catholic Church could unite [Anglican](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anglican) clerics and Puritan ministers despite their differences and conflicts.

So, separation of church and state was never intended to mean that we should remove all notions of God and religion from our political process. The First Amendment was to ensure our citizens freedom OF religion, not FROM it (as the atheists and secularists demand).

In researching this topic on the internet, I found this on a site called [**www.StackExchange.com**](http://www.StackExchange.com) **–** the author poses the question…

**Does Christianity teach the values for Democracy to work?**

As an example, the United States Declaration of Independence states that all humans have rights because they were created equal by God:

*We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. (*[*source*](http://www.earlyamerica.com/earlyamerica/freedom/doi/text.html)*)*

“**Inalienable**” is defined as a right according to natural law and cannot be taken away, denied, or transferred; also called **Natural rights** - those not contingent upon the laws, customs, or beliefs of any particular culture or government, and therefore universal and [inalienable](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alienation_(property_law)) (i.e., rights that cannot be repealed or restrained by human laws

The idea of religious liberty has been defended from Calvin onwards.

Therefore are Christian values the reason democracy became a *viable* way of governing?

The idea of unalienable rights was an important part of providing the form of government that was eventually established here - not a democracy, but a *Constitutional Republic* with some democratic elements: A form of government in which the Constitution is the rule of law, and the protection of freedoms established in the Constitution were designed, specifically, to **limit** what the government is able to do, and thereby protect the country from the pitfalls of a true Democracy.

The U.S. is now fractured and divided among many lines because people on ***all*** sides seem to have forgotten the fact that we're not a democracy; that **might** (whether in strength, or in numbers) doesn't make **right**, and that there's a reason we are supposed to have a limited government. The fact that we've forgotten the idea of inalienable rights is allowing us to slip into the "Tyranny of the Majority" (a term coined by Alexix deTocqueville) and it's only the fact that both sides have approximately equal support that we're not there already. Point in case, Chris Cuomo (son of Mario and a professed Catholic) in a recent interview stated that our rights do not come from God, they come from man. I think he confuses rights with laws, which, of course, do come from man.

I will now cite 8 statements from **Alexix deTocqueville** (French Sociologist) from his seminal work “Democracy in America”, published in 1837

As I read each statement, think about if this is the case today

1. *Upon my arrival in the United States the religious aspect of the country was the first thing that struck my attention; and the longer I stayed there, the more I perceived the great political consequences resulting from this new state of things.*
2. *In France I had almost always seen the spirit of religion and the spirit of freedom marching in opposite directions. But in America I found they were intimately united and that they reigned in common over the same country.* (many people don’t realize how badly the French Revolution persecuted Catholics)*.*
3. *Religion in America...must be regarded as the foremost of the political institutions of that country; for if it does not impart a taste for freedom, it facilitates the use of it.*
4. *There is no country in the world where the Christian religion retains a greater influence over the souls of men than in America. Christianity, therefore, reigns without obstacle, by universal consent...*
5. *The safeguard of morality is religion, and morality is the best security of law as well as the surest pledge of freedom.*
6. *The Americans combine the notions of Christianity and of Liberty so intimately in their minds, that it is impossible to make them conceive the one without the other.*
7. *Christianity is the companion of liberty in all its conflicts -- the cradle of its infancy, and the divine source of its claims.*
8. *America is great because America is good, and if America ever ceases to be good, America will cease to be great.*

deTocqueville went on to say that our form of Democracy would collapse under its own weight when the people see that they can keep voting for the government to give them benefits (at the expense of the producers), or as Maggie Thatcher stated about Socialism 150 years later “it’s a great system until it runs out of other people’s money”.

This is also consistent with General Systems Theory as explained by its father, **Ludwig Von Bertalanffy**, who said that all systems have a lifecycle that you could represent by a bell curve, and they will eventually die, due to entropy *(the natural movement from order to disorder)*, and be replaced by a new system (but not without the pain of rebuilding).

However, deTocqueville postulated that the primary force that could stop this decline from growing dependence on government is a strong moral and ethical code, based in our faith systems, where people would believe that they are called to give, not just receive. And we all can see where that is heading in today’s ever declining focus on faith and religion, and our “it’s all about me” entitlement culture.

A personal observation is that as governments grow in size and power, religion and God seem to shrink. Totalitarian regimes like the former Soviet Union couldn’t tolerate religion, because it threatened their power base – that is, they couldn’t control the people if their first allegiance was to their God – so they closed the churches and forbade the practice of religion.

To preserve their power, our politicians continue to foster fear – from terrorists, to economic issues, to climate change, to race relations. **Michael Creighton** described this very well in his 2004 novel, State of Fear. However, Jesus continually told us to not be afraid and trust in God. **Henri Nouwen** stated in a recent reflection*…The world enslaves us with fear; the Spirit frees us from that slavery and restores us to the true relationship.* In a perfect world, if we all lived by our Judeo-Christian values, government would not be necessary.

In response to the recent Supreme Court decision on gay marriage, **Bishop Michael Jarrell** of the Diocese of Lafayette, Louisiana, he stated*…” Let me state very plainly that no human court has the authority to change what God has written into the law of creation. This ruling is irreconcilable with the nature and definition of marriage as established by Divine Law. I realize that this ruling will create conscience problems for many Catholics, especially those in public office. In some cases, civil disobedience may be a proper response."*

Now I’d like to show a 2 minute Youtube by Harvard Business School Professor **Clay Christensen** on Religious Freedom

[**https://www.youtube.com/embed/YjntXYDPw44**](https://www.youtube.com/embed/YjntXYDPw44)

A profound message that pretty much sums up what I’ve ineptly tried to convey.

A final comment is that as we struggle with all these issues, we must continue to have **hope** that God is with us through it all. Things may be bad now, but they were also so pretty bad in the past.

I hope the questions give you some ideas and challenges to consider…

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**Questions:**

1. What do you think the impact of our growing secular culture, and the steady removal of God from the public square, will have on our democratic system?
   1. How might this manifest itself?
2. Do you think that deTocqueville was correct when he said that our American democratic system is doomed to eventually fail, unless we maintain a strong religious culture and moral fiber?
   1. What can you do to help preserve our democracy and freedom?
3. Do you agree with Archbishop Chaput that to be good Catholics our mission is to change the world and actively engage in the political process?
   1. Do you believe that you have done so adequately, or do avoid politics because it provokes controversy and divisiveness?
   2. Should we practice civil disobedience when laws require us to violate our moral and religious beliefs?
4. Why do you think that our country is so polarized, with little civility between political opponents?
   1. Does religion have a role in this divide – amplifying it or healing it?
5. How is our Catholic faith still relevant in our current political system?
   1. Are anti-Catholic sentiments resurfacing in our country?
6. Do you believe that we are an exceptional nation? Why or why not?

*“America is great because America is good, and if America ever ceases to be good, America will cease to be great.”-* Alexis de Tocqueville

[optional – for p.4] There are four references to a deity found in the *Declaration of Independence*, which was primarily co-authored by Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Franklin, both friends of Thomas Paine. Those phrases are: *"Nature's God,"* *"Creator,"* *"Supreme Judge,"* and *"Divine Providence."* Specifically, the *Declaration* starts out:

*When in the Course of human events, it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another, and to assume among the powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which the Laws of Nature and of Nature's God entitle them, a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation.*

The Declaration of Independence clearly asserts earthly authority, the words "Laws of Nature" are even capitalized. In addition to reading the usage of the word God in context, it is also important to understand the Declaration in its own historical context. Furthermore, Benjamin Franklin was a self-declared Deist and it was he who made the final edits to the document.

The Declaration of Independence would have been clearly recognizable as deistic at the time it was written. The Declaration did not, for example, state: "In the name of The Lord God Jesus Christ," as would have been a much more traditional reference to the Christian God in a manner that was used by Europeans at the time. The Declaration was written during the height of the Enlightenment when Deism was popular and widely known. Deistic language was easy to recognize by people of the time because Deists avoided all of the traditional references to the Christian God. When Deists referred to "God" they used terms like "Supreme Being", "Almighty Judge", "Creator", "God of Nature", "Nature's God", etc. On the other hand Christians typically used terms like "the Lord", "Jesus Christ", "God", "Savior", etc.