

The Gospel tells us ... often ... to give God what's God's. But today it says something else. Give God what's God's ... and give Caesar what's Caesar's.

Caesar is ... the government. Governments come in many forms. They are good, bad, in between. But if we use government services ... roads, libraries, civil protection, safety enforcement, due process of law courts ... we owe the government something back

Some of the things we owe Caesar? Taxes, for one thing. We pay our honest share. And the laws that exist for the public good --- we obey them, and not think they're just for everybody else. In a democracy, we owe it to Caesar to vote thoughtfully, trying to select directions and policies that are for the common good. And finally, as our bishops teach in **Faithful Citizenship**, we owe Caesar ... to practice politics.

Practicing politics doesn't mean, for them, signs in lawns, provocative sound bites, learning how to exert pressures, insist on paybacks and payoffs, and so forth. Practicing politics means coming together, in the public forum, to discuss frankly, openly respectfully ... how the community can make the best possible decisions regarding public policy, law, the common good, war, peace and so forth. Practicing politics in this sense isn't focused primarily on elections. In a way, elections bring out the worst sometimes --- mud-slinging, the shrinking of an opponent's thought-out position to some warped one-sentence summary that's easy to attack, the intentional raising of aggression and outrage with the purpose of winning some fight, not building a common consensus. No, practicing politics for them means we show up to discuss and promote, with our fellow citizens, things that affect the good of the community, the common good.

Here's something I particularly like: Catholic practice, they explain, isn't about prevailing on each and every public issue. We don't want to control the conversation and discourse; we just want to be present for it and participate in it. We have a point of view and values that a fractured society, wounded by terrorist attacks, divided ... badly needs.

The most precious thing our faith offers ... among others I'm sure ... is respect for human life ... conviction that human life is precious and holy, from conception to natural death ... and that being precious, every human life has a right to protection, security, work, education, housing, health care, shelter.

We walk this talk. Our Catholic Church is by far the largest non-government provider of respect for life services: education, welfare, support, charities, clinics. We make huge contributions to what makes the country wonderful. We should be present in public life.

Not that that's always easy. It has been said that Catholics are not completely at home in either political party --- there are parts of both platforms we can promote and other parts we challenge. We have to make our homes where we can, choose sometimes the lesser of two evils ... and in any way we can continue to promote the true common good.

It will never be enough for us, now or later, to stand back and say, "Ain't it awful." In Salinas, in the state, in the country we join fellow citizens to create the best directions and policies we can.

We pay God what is God's; we also try to give Caesar what's Caesar's.