

Reflection on “Render Unto Caesar” by Charles Chaput

Jim Ressler, Incarnate Word Men’s Ministry

The Incarnate Word men’s ministry recently finished sharing a book that challenged the status quo of what it means to be a Catholic and an American. This reflection shares some of the insights from the men’s ministry. You are welcome to borrow a copy of the book *Render Unto Caesar* from the parish library and inquire into the men’s ministry.

Where do Americans’ loyalties lie? Country? Church? Political party? Corporation? Ethnic group? Sports team?

All of the above?

Archbishop Charles Chaput (archdiocese of Denver) addressed the application of Catholic faith in the world, specifically in the public arena, in the book “Render Unto Caesar.” Chaput observes, “A public life that excludes God does not enrich the human spirit. It kills it.”¹ Christians are expected to be “in the world, but not of the world” (taken from John 17 and 2 Cor 10) and to deny oneself, take up our cross and follow Christ (Luke 9:23). How do these commands influence our culture? Publicly, we are increasingly becoming a more secular society in which expressions of faith are discouraged and belittled. The Christian viewpoint is often excluded from debate in the secular world. Chaput counters that “we need to find again the courage to be Catholic Christians first, not in opposition to our country, but to serve its best ideals.”²

The model of Catholic citizenship was shown in the lives of St. Thomas More, St. Augustine of Hippo, and patriot Charles Carrol. Yes, that means getting involved in politics, but instead of basing our positions on political allegiances, we are to hold

¹ p. 13

² p. 7

unswerving loyalty to Christ, our King, and His Church. From Constantine to the Second Vatican Council, Chaput discussed both the triumphs and many scandals of the Church in the political world. Pope John XXIII initiated and Pope John Paul II embraced the vision of Vatican II. New beginnings were planted despite confused execution by the bishops and lay people. As the council encouraged actively embracing Jesus Christ as the source of truth that fosters Christian renewal, our culture descended into moral chaos and lowered the Church to a mediocre role in personal morality. During the 1970's and 1980's, many misinterpreted Vatican II as a license for dissent with church teachings based upon a misunderstood role of one's conscience. Yet Chaput clearly states the "the Catholic faith does not hold, and Vatican II did not teach, that respect for conscience means that individuals have absolute sovereignty in determining their own truth, or that anyone's choice of beliefs is as good as any other."³ (emphasis mine)

Our group examined our own attitudes, our culture, and our church in the light of American history and Catholic identity. As Chaput quoted one observer of Vatican II, "Gaudin et Spes actually upholds the old personal morality, and in doing so exalts human beings. The view of man that is ascendant in American society today is not one that thinks too much of man, but too little."⁴ We Catholics are still learning how to follow through on the course set by Vatican II.

The role of Catholics in public life raised interesting debates. Why do prominent Catholic politicians (Edward Kennedy, Joe Biden, John Kerry, Nancy Pelosi, for example), universities and institutions hold positions contrary to Catholic morality? What should be done about it? Passive Catholics in the public life have made political compromises, believing to be accepted as a Catholic means to keep one's faith as a private matter that is secondary to the needs of the people. These misperceptions of Catholic identity need to be countered by faithful, well-informed, committed Catholic laypeople if the Church in America is to redeem the secular world from the inside out.⁵ If

³ P. 129

⁴ p. 132

⁵ p. 190

we bow down to the secular gods, history has shown the result will be political tyranny. “Freedom is a system based on courage. Unfortunately, courage can be inconvenient,” and costly. “As the Greek philosopher Aristippus once told a colleague named Diogenes, ‘If you would learn to be subservient to the king, you would not have to live on such garbage as beans.’ Diogenes answered, ‘If you have learned to live on beans, you would not have to flatter the king.’”⁶ Catholics can and should have a profound influence in the public sphere, not to go along with the flow towards secularism, but as citizens of heaven first, “to be authentically and unselfishly Catholic.”

⁶ p. 218