

In the Heartland with Bishop Pates

**“I am the King’s Good Servant but God’s First”**

– St. Thomas More

*The following homily was presented by Bishop Pates on June 4<sup>th</sup> at the Catholic Health Association Mass in conjunction with the CHA Annual Assembly in Anaheim, California.*

The question the Herodians and Sadducees posed to Jesus embraces the age-old debate that has bedeviled relationships of Church and civil government from time immemorial. The response of Jesus is classic: “Repay to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God.”

Jesus adroitly points out that Caesar or the government has its proper role to which we render cooperation while simultaneously God lays claim to our allegiance. Inevitable conflict over territory ensues. How is such to be resolved?

In the Roman empire, the emergence of a protected Christianity occurred with the conversion of the emperor. State and faith found working accommodation with newly found belief in the Christian God by Emperor Constantine. Historically, the balance of these two loyalties has been rare.

The tension played itself out in the Middle Ages and Renaissance in the dramatic deaths of St. Thomas Becket and St. Thomas More. In modern times, 22 martyrs in Uganda died on June 3, 1886 victims of their rulers’ fierce anger. Charles Lwanga and companions reproached King Mwanga for his cruelty and immorality. For their heroic stand, they underwent martyrdoms. In the multiplicity of heroic responses to religious oppression, St. Thomas More’s last words ring out across the centuries in witness to a right understanding of the principle enunciated by Jesus: “I am the King’s good servant, but God’s first.”

The conflict of faith and state remains highly charged in our times. In formulating its teaching, Catholic faith derives truth from self-evident natural law and scriptural revelation. Often times, such teaching encounters opposition with secular positions trumpeted by government. Determining what belongs to Caesar and what belongs to God is constantly debated in the halls of executive government, the legislatures, courts, our churches and schools and on Main Street.

The founders of the United States, seeking relief from religious oppression embedded in European government structures, believed religious liberty was essential to human flourishing, a belief they enshrined in the First Amendment of the United States Constitution. The guarantee of religious liberty in effect codifies the admonition: “Repay to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God.”

Because religion introduces an authority that can challenge the state’s designs, the exercise of this freedom is billed the first of freedoms. It is almost inevitable that government will move to infringe upon religious freedom often times in what it considers a more broadly based protection

of rights. Nonetheless, as Vatican Council II declared in *Dignitatis Humanae*: “Religious freedom, ... which men demand as necessary to fulfill their duty to worship God, has to do with immunity from coercion in civil society” (#1).

During the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, many states enacted Blaine Amendments, which discriminate against religiously-affiliated schools by restricting the public aid they can receive. More recently, the federal government has denied contracts to highly competent and effective faith-based agencies providing relief to victims of human trafficking, as well as important developmental projects in third world countries, because of conflict with religious and moral objections. To its credit, USAID sent out instructions to country missions last year that addressed the problem international relief agencies had encountered. The situation regarding programs for human trafficking victims remains troubling.

The most notable incursion and one which yet begs for adequate resolution is the Health and Human Services mandate for contraceptive and sterilization coverage under the Affordable Care Act. HHS’s mandate violates religious freedom in two specific ways.

First, the mandate forces actions in opposition to one’s conscience. Institutions and individuals are required to facilitate and pay for coverage that goes against their consciences in the form of drugs that induce abortions, are contraceptive in nature, and which sterilize.

Second, even in trying to frame a religious exemption from this mandate, HHS effectively defines what is religious and not religious in character. The very narrow definition, both as originally proposed and as reframed in the most recent round of rulemaking, denies the important reality of faith in action. Catholic education, Catholic charities and Catholic health care are faith in action. They are expressions of our deepest beliefs. These ministries originate out of faith convictions and are sustained by the same. Our beliefs, our history and tradition, and our personal faith speak irrefutably of their Catholic religious identity. In sum, these initiatives belong to God as the source of origin. HHS’s arbitrary distinction between “houses of worship” that deserve protection, and houses of Christian caring and healing that do not deserve it, should not be allowed to stand.

Legislation adopted since *Roe v. Wade* has protected religious liberty and recognized rights of conscience in laws such as the Church amendment and the Weldon Amendment. Thus, while objectionable procedures are permitted in law, what belongs to God is respected by not forcing institutions or individuals driven by conscience to participate in their delivery or pay for them.

Seeking the balance between the prerogatives of Caesar and those of God continues to be an issue of serious consequence in our day both nationally and internationally. Literally, in the name of God, we of Catholic identity are called to remain in steadfast unity by insisting on religious liberty. We do so in our outreach through education, charities and healthcare united with the Church under the leadership designated by Jesus – the Apostles and their successors.

Again *Dignitatis Humanae* states, “In all his activity a man is bound to follow his conscience in order that he may come to God, the end and purpose of life. It follows that he is not to be forced to act in a manner contrary to his conscience” (#3).

In my own bailiwick, I am ever so grateful for the commitment of Mercy Health Care System and the leadership of the very capable Dave Vellinga and the soon-to-be new president Robert P. "Bob" Ritz. It is most reassuring and supportive for all of us to be singing on the same note. In so doing, we serve the broader society in the protection of our constitutional freedoms while delivering outstanding healthcare with special attention to the poor.

The Catholic Church and its allied organizations and institutions will face opposition and intransigence from powers that want to see a secular morality predominate or even improperly exercise government authority to force compliance. Similar to a Thomas Becket or Thomas More as well as the group of African martyrs, we will endure strong opposition by insisting on repaying to God what is God's. May we corporately and individually courageously hold steadfast to: "I am the King's good servant but God's first."