

## Living the Spirit Church and State

On a personal note I must admit that current events have been the focus of my attention and my interest. On these matters I cannot speak in a formal way as a kind of representative or agent of the Church. However, in this country we do have free speech, so I am entitled to my opinions. At the same time I see the value in the Church's imposition of a ban on political activities by our clergy, such as election to office.

There are current matters that continue to touch our lives as Catholics and as citizens. It is the need to interpret fairly the relationship of Church and State according to our Constitution. The Constitution of our country is a great document, and it is a living one. It has been amended to increase its political perfection. The supreme law of the land has been a reason for our political success as a nation. When the first amendments enumerated the rights of citizens, the founding fathers set forth some principles that have guided us for our history. The first amendment gave us a clear statement concerning the inter-relationship of church and state, or more broadly of the place of formal religion in our public lives. [This is now in some danger, no doubt.]

Although we often hear that there should be a wall of separation between the Church (religion) and the State (government), this concept is not really a part of our Constitution. It does not literally speak of such a wall. It is in speaking of a wall that some problems and controversies continue to present themselves to judicial scholars. When we witnessed the confirmation hearings of Judge Roberts, [the last Catholic appointee], the issue came up. Because there are areas of current legal actions, it was not possible according to traditional ethics for him to give prospective answers to his views. However, that does not mean that ordinary citizens cannot have such views. Nor does it deny even the highest judicial authorities from having personal views.

The Constitution definitely forbids the establishment of one national recognized church or institutional form of religion. Some countries have such an established church. The colonies had them, and they were even continued despite the Constitution for a number of years afterwards. Of course, today we know that no one finds this a difficulty, for we have no such established church.

Today, however, there are those who interpret the First Amendment as seeing every form of public religious practice or expression as unconstitutional. The actual meaning is twisted to mean freedom from religion, not of religion. To consider every mention of God in the public square an establishment of religion is frankly irrational and very much against what seems to be the will of the majority. That will is not easily to be dismissed in a democracy. Religion is not so simple! Nor is our Constitution!

Many Catholics approach such questions without a real grasp of the history of the Catholic Church in America. It has not been well publicized in our day. Historians dismiss the anti-Catholic prejudices and bias in that history. I doubt that many know how in Massachusetts in the early 1800's Christmas celebration was forbidden as "popish." For that reason on Christmas, a workday, Catholics had to get up before dawn to get to Mass on a day they observed as a religious holyday. They were not forbidden to practice their faith, but it was made difficult. Several States in our early history supported the Protestant churches almost as established by law. With immigration things changed radically. Just as slavery was ultimately forbidden by the amendment process and sadly a

civil war to enforce emancipation, so gradually Catholics came to be accepted as citizens. Still, anti-Catholic attitudes continued for many years.

Only a few fanatics actually believe today that the Pope is just waiting for the day to take over our government and imprison all heretics and non-believers. Yet even now some would deprive believing citizens of the right to a place in the Public Square, if they bring their religious belief and practice to it. As citizens we need to be ever vigilant to protect our rights, even as we trust our legal institutions to do so for all of us.

I have long been a member of the Catholic League for Religious and Civil Rights. It was founded years ago to combat – at least in some small way—any public anti-Catholic bias found in our communities. Its leader Bill Donahue, seen on television from time to time, defends the Church. He does so with much vigor, sometimes to the point of making more irenic people feel uncomfortable. It is not a bad idea for Catholics to help the media when they show any ignorance or error [or bias] concerning Catholic beliefs.

My own opinion is that we are reasonably fortunate to live in our own environs. The Church, despite recent scandals, is still accorded a respectful role in the life of our communities. Our local papers do seem to try to balance their views. Sometimes we find good religious articles in them. Issues that touch on religious belief are not kept under cover. By discussion and open consideration we may yet find a suitable development of our laws and their derivation from sound constitutional principles. Let us hope that those myths that survive among those who have never had the chance to get to know us Catholics will be proven to be just that – myths.

One myth is that Catholics cannot be really good citizens, since they owe allegiance to a foreign power. Nonsense! None of us are citizens of the Vatican! Our allegiance to the Church is spiritual and religious, not civil. So it is that we believe that the Church speaks for good in such matters as faith and morals. [Remind others how many Catholics have shed their blood to fight the wars of our nation, with honor and genuine patriotism. Catholics are enthusiastic as they recite the pledge of allegiance with sincere hearts!]

I think it is essential that we understand Church laws are internal to the Church's life. For example, radical ownership of church property is vested in the people. However, our church law makes the bishop the trustee (for want of a better word) of the material goods of the church. Misunderstanding of this leads to grave problems, as civil courts look to give this property to those who claim a right to it for any reason. Church property is in jeopardy. Frankly, the bishops cannot under church law give parishes away. Another problem is how our bishops are made responsible to civil courts for their internal governance of their churches. We must ask if this actually makes meaningless the First Amendment for Catholics and their Church. Our first response should be to pray about and use all due peaceful measures to oppose any limitation of our religious freedom.

Reflection on this critical area of Church and State inspires my earnest plea that my readers pray daily for our country. It deserves this gift as a distinct contribution from our Catholic religious heritage. It is a great good for a country to have the benefit of the prayers of those who aspire to live the Gospel by loving their neighbors, even spiritually. Christianity in its best forms has been and always must be a great benefit for our society. And remember, we are blessed that America is really beautiful in its people, including each of us. God bless America! Happy Fourth of July!

God love you always

Monsignor Morrison

[This is a reworked former insert. It fits our **Fortnight for Freedom** activities.] 6/29/15