

Twenty-second Sunday after Pentecost

Our Civil Duties

"Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God's" (Matt., 22:21)

The Catholic Church has always taught her members that they are obliged in conscience to obey the civil laws of their respective nations. The basic reason is that those who govern civil society receive their authority from God, as St. Paul tells us, (*Rom.*, 13:1); hence in obeying them the citizens are actually obeying God Himself.

In today's Gospel Our Lord teaches us the same lesson when He tells us that we must render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, as well as rendering to God the things that are God's. Caesar was the reigning emperor when Christ spoke these words. The Jewish people had been subjected to him by conquest; and many of them believed that they were not bound to obey their Roman rulers. But Our Lord laid down the principle that legitimate civil rulers must be obeyed, whether or not we wish them in power over us. Even a pagan ruler or one who is immoral in his private life deserves the homage and loyalty of his people as long as he retains a lawful claim to his post of office.

In view of these principles taught by the Catholic Church, it is strange that there are many people in our land who claim that loyalty to the Catholic Church is incompatible with loyalty to the Government of the United States. From the very establishment of our nation this charge has been hurled against Catholics: "You cannot be a good Catholic and a good American at the same time." One would imagine that the record of loyalty and patriotism which the Catholics of the United States have merited for more than 150 years would sufficiently refute this charge.

The chief argument of those who deny the civil loyalty of Catholics is that we obey the Pope, who is a foreigner. Our answer is that we obey the Pope in spiritual, not civil matters, and that there is no contradiction between those two loyalties. It is only in the event that the civil law would usurp spiritual rights that we would disobey our civil rulers, for in that event they would be going beyond their rights, and then we should be obliged to heed the voice of the Church speaking in the name of Christ, and bidding us to render to God the things that are God's. Instead of being an obstacle to our patriotism, our loyalty to Catholic teaching and to the Catholic Church is rather an aid to good citizenship.

Practical Application

Be a good and obedient citizen because in the lawful rulers of our country you behold God Himself. Observe the laws of our country, pay your just taxes, and, above all, vote conscientiously for those whom you judge most worthy of civil office, irrespective of their political beliefs or their religious creed.