

March 29, 2015
The Last Sunday of Lent

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings Government and Conscience

The Christian submits to civil authority, St. Paul tells us, not only because civil authority has the power to exact that submission, but also "for the sake of conscience" (Romans 13:5).

In view of Paul's high respect for conscience, it is truly remarkable for him to assert that submission to civil authority is a *conscientious* concern. This claim clearly separates him from those moralists, even Christians, who relegate the dictates of civil government to the realm of mere "penal law."

Conscience (*syneidesis*), a word found seventeen times in the Pauline epistles, refers to the faculty by which man discerns moral differences and directs his ethical decisions. Paul's use of the word contains, in addition, the sense of "consciousness" and pertains to the reflecting self-possession of the moral person (Romans 2:15; 2 Corinthians 1:12). It designates the critical moral discourse (*syn-oida*) a man conducts within himself. It refers to his human intentionality, his transcendent capacity as a conscious moral agent.

The Christian's conscience, therefore, is the necessary and inseparable companion of his faith. It is to conscience, in fact, man's reflective faculty of cognitive intention, that the Gospel itself is addressed for recognition (2 Corinthians 4:4; 5:11), and it is conscience that receives the witness of the Holy Spirit (Romans 9:1).

When Paul appeals, therefore, to the conscience with regard to civil authority, he exalts political responsibility to a very high order, recognizing that the Christian soul stands within a social context of grave and radical obligations.

For the Christian, that is to say, political responsibility, including civil obedience, is not optional. He can flee from the responsibilities of political order no more than he can abandon his own humanity, for the first are necessary components of the second.

For this reason, also, man's relationship to civil authority has to do with his relationship to God. It pertains to those essential matters about which every conscience is answerable to the Judge of history. Although the things of Caesar are not to be confused with the things of God, God Himself requires that to Caesar be rendered his due—*conscientiously*.

In the eyes of St. Paul, furthermore, Caesar appears to stand—if one may say so—uncommonly high. He is called "God's servant," and, in principle, whoever resists Caesar "resists what God has appointed." Those who do so, moreover, "will incur judgment" (Romans 13:2,4).

An important inference is to be drawn from these considerations, and St. Paul does, in fact, draw it. If civil government truly acts as "God's servant," then the political order can hardly be amoral, or morally neutral. On the contrary, the Apostle regards civil authority, not only as subject to the restraints of the moral law, but as charged with a special oversight of the moral order. He describes this oversight in both negative and positive terms.

First, civil government serves the moral order negatively by discouraging evil, and specifically by punishing men that do evil things. The government is the proper political agent of social sanctions. It possesses the *jus gladii* and "does not bear the sword in vain" (Romans 13:4). This seems obvious enough, and all but anarchists accept it.

This does not mean that the sanctions of civil law should cover every conceivable moral situation, and certainly there is no proper execution of civil justice apart from political prudence, even wisdom. It does mean, however, that the sanctions of civil government are not arbitrary; they are in principle buttressed by the moral law.

Second, civil government serves the moral order positively by encouraging the good. "Do what is good and you will have praise from the same," wrote St. Paul, thereby affirming the pedagogical value of civil law. It does not exist solely for the restraint of evil, but also for the advancement of the moral good, appreciating and encouraging such things as tend to improve the moral existence of men.

Precisely because it relies on and serves the moral order, the art of governing, the proper maintenance and sanctioning of civil life, properly addresses the Christian's conscience. It is significant, then, that both times when Paul uses the word "conscience" in the Acts of the Apostles, he does so in a judicial context (Acts 23:1; 24:16).

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