



To God what is of God and to Caesar what is of the Caesar

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The Church-State relationship explained in the encyclical. The article analyses: social charity, the mission of the Church and the common good.

In his first encyclical, "Deus Caritas Est," Benedict XVI insists that the Catholic Church and all Christians have a valuable role to play in achieving a more just world. A significant section of the second part of the encyclical is devoted to a look at where is the division between Caesar and God in today's secular environment.

The Pope begins by quoting the words of the Second Vatican Council, which recognizes the legitimate autonomy of the temporal sphere. But he immediately observes: "Politics is more than just a technique for determining public order: its origin and its goal are precisely injustice, and it is ethical" (No. 28).

When deciding what justice means for the State and how it can be achieved, a legitimate path is opened for faith. Applying faith to questions of justice, the Holy Father says, does not mean that there is an attempt to impose religion on non-believers. Rather, this can purify human reason, allowing it to better appreciate the demands of justice. In the same way, the social teaching of the Church is also based on reason and natural law and is therefore by the nature of every human being.

Far from promoting a specific political agenda, the Church seeks to stimulate and form consciences so that each person is better prepared to take responsibility for securing a more just society. The political task "cannot be an immediate task of the Church," adds the encyclical.

The Church is not trying to replace the State. "But neither can nor should not be left out in the struggle for justice", writes Benedict XVI. Indeed, it observes, promotes justice, and the common good "is very interested."

Returning to the main topic of the encyclical, the Pontiff explains that even in a just

society, love –charity- will always be necessary. Also, personal initiative, motivated by love, is important to avoid a situation where everything is left to the State, which regulates and controls everything.

Not only of bread

Besides, this love, together with the material help, offers serenity and care of the soul. "Aid often more necessary than material sustenance", says the encyclical. No matter how fair social structures are, man does not live only on bread.

The Pope also distinguishes between the institution of the Church and the role of its laic members. It is up to the latter to work for a fair society and to participate directly in public life. Charity should encourage this activity, which must be lived as 'social charity' (No. 29).

The encyclical, in No. 30, also deals briefly with the issue of globalization. This process means that concern for our neighbor now transcends national confines and extends to the whole world. Increased international ties have led to increased cooperation between state agencies and church organizations that have been fruitful. The Pope also has words of praise for many people who are involved in volunteer work.

However, in all this activity, I observed the encyclical, it is important to maintain the Christian identity. The charitable activity of the Church should not be diluted "in a generic welfare organization" (No. 31).

Christian charity must include the material aspects of helping others, including ensuring sufficient professional competence. But those who work in charitable organizations also need to use their hearts, so the commitment to help their fellows derive from their faith made active through love.

This charitable activity must remain independent of parties and ideologies and not be a means of "proselytism", the pontiff insists. About this last point, the encyclical points out that love is free and is not practiced to achieve other purposes.

This does not mean that we should leave God aside, he immediately adds the text. Charity is always a concern for the whole person, including his faith. Moreover, "often, the deepest root of suffering is precisely the absence of God." Even though we should never impose our faith on others, we must also know when it is time to speak of God.

The mission of the Church

Benedict XVI has on many occasions touched on the theme of Church-State relations and the involvement of Christians in politics.

On October 18, he wrote a letter to the president of the lower house of the Italian parliament, Pier Ferdinando Casini, to commemorate the anniversary of the visit of

Pope John Paul II to this legislative body three years earlier.

Benedict XVI assured Casini that the Church "does not intend to claim for itself any privilege, but only to have the possibility of fulfilling its mission, in respect of the legitimate secularity of the State."

This legitimate secularism, he observed, "is not in contrast to the Christian message, but rather has a debt to him, as the scholars of the history of civilization know well." For this reason, the Pope expressed his confidence that the parliament would honor the memory of John Paul II by promoting the human person, the family, the schools and the attention to the needs of the poor.

This political activity is precisely carried out by the laic members of the Church. However, the Pope has observed many times, the Church has an important role in shaping them so that they can carry out this task in a proper way.

In a letter dated November 19 to the Archbishop of Mexico City, Cardinal Norberto Rivera Carrera, the Holy Father spoke of the need for the laic to put "their professional capacities and the testimony of an exemplary life at the service of evangelization of social life, making it at the same time more just and appropriate to the human person."

Common good

The letter was written on the occasion of a meeting gathered to present the compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church. In it, the Pope observed that the laic "need a solid formation that allows them to discern in each specific situation, above particular interests or opportunistic proposals, which improves the human being in its integrity and the characteristics that the various social agencies must have to promote the true common good."

On December 3, in a speech to a group of Polish bishops on a visit to Rome, the Pontiff returned on this subject. In the work of proclaiming God to contemporary culture «the role of the laic is irreplaceable», the Pope insisted. "His testimony of faith is particularly eloquent and effective because it is given in the daily reality and in the areas to which a priest accesses with difficulty."

Benedict XVI exhorted the laic present in the policy to "give a courageous and visible testimony of Christian values, which must be reaffirmed and defended if they are threatened." And he added: "They will do it publicly, both in political debates and in the media".

The Pontiff continued with the theme of Christian politicians in his speech to another group of bishops on December 17th. These politicians must be helped to be aware of their Christian identity and also of the universal moral values that have their foundation in human nature, he explained. This has to be done in a way that is guided by their "Christian conscience", and what they do on behalf of the

Church together with their pastors and thus give to Caesar, and God, what is owed them.