

29th Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year A

Fr. Samuel Springuel

18 October, 2026

1st Reading Isaiah 45:1,4–6

Responsorial Psalm Psalm 96:1,3,4–5,7–8,9–10

2nd Reading 1 Thessalonians 1:1–5b

Gospel Matthew 22:15–21

It's election season here in the US. All around the country people are preparing to vote, currently voting, or have already cast their vote. Having voted by mail, I thankfully find myself in the last of these categories, so I've already begun to ignore the political rhetoric that pervades the airwaves at this time of year, but it's impossible to ignore completely, especially given today's Gospel.

Politics and religion have always been strange bedfellows. Religion, if you're doing it right, should have some impact on every aspect of your life. Politics, if you're doing it wrong, makes the same claim. Politicians love to claim the mantle of faith. It gives everything they do the veneer of righteousness. Opposition becomes morally evil and therefore unthinkable. Both the Pharisees and the Herodians knew this, even if they were on opposite sides. Roman taxes supported Roman temples and thus the Pharisees viewed them as a form of blasphemy, besides going to an occupying power. Roman taxes also funded the Roman government, its subsidiary governments (like Herod's), and the military of both. They were, almost literally, the life-blood of the Herodians. This is what makes the question posed to Jesus so pernicious: the answer cannot help but upset one side or the other.

Things haven't changed much in our own day. Some politicians will justify what they do in explicitly religious terms, calling the other side blasphemous for thinking otherwise. Even clergy on the other side cannot escape this kind of accusation, as some Protestant ministers who are running for public office have found out. I dare say that while Catholic clergy cannot run for public office under canon law, this doesn't stop some from denouncing them in similar terms, even up to and including Pope Leo, when said clergy dare to criticize a particular political position near and dear to the politician's heart or power.

And going to the extreme in the other direction doesn't help. Committed secularists talk about the wall between Church and State as if religion is supposed to be some private thing that never leaves the confines of the place of worship or the home. If you take your religion seriously, though, you know that's not true. Christ's command to love one's neighbor: to feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, clothe the naked, welcome the stranger, visit the sick and imprisoned; this command has political ramifications. While private charity can touch on any of these things, only coordinated social action, *i.e.*, politics, can truly address them systematically. The separation of Church and State

isn't meant to be an exclusion of religion from public life. Religion under those conditions is dead. Rather the separation ensures that the power centers of morality and social function remain distinct because distinction is absolutely essential to a multi-cultural society that wishes to hold its extremes in check.

All of this means that for the religious person voting is hard, and for the Catholic living in the United States, it's even harder. Not only are Catholic clergy not allowed to run for public office, but the Church doesn't publish a list of approved candidates, there is no political party whose sole aim is the implementation of Church teaching, and in some sense there cannot be. The moral positions of the Church are not easily translated into political policy. While we are instructed to feed the hungry, for instance, there are multiple ways that this can be done and it is up to each individual candidate and voter to discern between the possibilities based on the circumstances of their time and place. What works at one time in one area might not work elsewhere or at a different time. It makes for such a confusing mess that it's tempting to just throw up your hands and say your vote doesn't matter anyway since you are just 1 person of the millions that live in the US.

But for those living in a democracy, today's teaching points to an obligation to vote. I might even go so far to say that not voting could be considered sinful because you're not rendering unto Caesar what is his. While there may not be an Internal Voting Service that will come after you for non-voting the way the IRS will come after you for non-payment of taxes, voting is, like taxes, an essential component of the functioning of our government. In order to properly render unto Caesar what is his, we must participate in elections. It is through those votes, at least in part, that we work to bring about the Kingdom of God on earth, as we pray every time we say the Our Father.

Of course, there will be times when we don't like our choices; when it seems like all the options on the ballot are bad and we're merely choosing the lesser of two evils. In such instances we may be tempted to write-in Pope Leo, or some other person we admire, but who has no reasonable chance of winning. I won't say that's never warranted, but I think we're better off making the hard decision. God can and does make use of broken politics, messed up politicians, just as he made use of Cyrus. This isn't an endorsement of the mess, rather it is a trust in God's ability to write straight with crooked lines. If our own lives, as messed up as they are at times, can be viewed through the lens of divine providence, then so can our social arrangements. We must do our part, make the best decision we can, but then we also must surrender ourselves to God and let him take care of those things which we cannot control.

In the end, when we stand before the throne and God sorts the sheep from the goats, our politics will not be excised out and remain unaccounted for in the sorting. God will judge us on our political actions just as he judges us on all our other actions. But just like those other actions, the fundamental question will be very simple: did we use politics to advance our love of God and of neighbor? Did we proclaim the Good News, the Gospel, with the way voted just like we are supposed to do with all aspects of our lives?