

## Why I Am Catholic

Church teaching about the proper role of government.

The ongoing healthcare reform debate has raised questions about: What is the role of government? The Catholic Church has always spoken on this, from its earliest days. The Bible also addresses this issue, directly and indirectly.

The scribes and chief priests ask Jesus about paying taxes. He surprisingly responds: "Then repay to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God." (*Lk 20:25, Mk 12:17, Mt 22:21*) Earthly government has its place when it is for the good of all. Jesus also speaks about Dependence on God and not on earthly rulers or earthly things: "So do not worry and say, 'What are we to eat?' or 'What are we to drink?' or 'What are we to wear?' All these things the pagans seek. Your heavenly Father knows that you need them all." (*Mt 6:31-32*)

St. Paul at the end of his life seeks a trial before the Roman government because he is a citizen and the Jews want to put him to death based on false accusations. He eventually suffers a martyr's death as Emperor Nero sees the Christians as a threat and uses them as a scapegoat.

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* states that: "Political authority must be exercised within the limits of the moral order and must guarantee the conditions for the exercise of freedom." (1923) "The exercise of authority is measured morally in terms of its divine origin, and its reasonable nature and its specific object. No one can command or establish what is contrary to the dignity of persons and the natural law. . . The exercise of authority is meant to give outward expression to a just hierarchy of values in order to facilitate the exercise of freedom and responsibility by all." (2235-36)

Civil authority flows from the Fourth Commandment that "also enjoins us to honor all who for our good have received authority in society from God. It clarifies the duties of those who exercise authority as well as those who benefit from it." (2234) "Political rights are meant to be exercised for the common good of the nation and the human community." (2237)

Pope Pius XII in 1941, during WWII, stated that: "to safeguard the inviolable rights of the human person, and to facilitate the performance of his duties, is the principal duty of every public authority." Pope John XXIII in his 1963 encyclical "Peace on Earth" writes that: "One of the principal duties of any government, moreover, is the suitable and adequate superintendence and co-ordination of men's respective rights in society. . . In addition, heads of States must make a positive contribution to the creation of an overall climate in which the individual can both safeguard his own rights and fulfill his duties, and can do so readily. For if there is one thing we have learned in the school of experience, it is surely this: that, in the modern world especially, political, economic and cultural inequities among citizens become more and more widespread when public authorities fail to take appropriate action in these spheres. And the consequence is that human rights and duties are thus rendered totally ineffective. . . The public administration must therefore give considerable care and thought to the question of social as well as economic progress, and to the development of essential services." (62-64) The duties of citizens may be surprising for some. "Those subject to authority should regard those in authority as representatives of God, who has made them stewards of his gifts." (2238) St. Peter writes: "Be subject for the Lord's sake to every human institution. . . Live as free men, yet without using your freedom as a pretext for evil; but live as servants of God." (*I Pet 2:13,16*) "Submission to authority and co-responsibility for the common good make it morally obligatory to pay taxes, to exercise the right to vote, and to defend one's country." (2240) St. Paul writes: "Pay to all of them their dues, taxes to whom taxes are due, toll to whom toll is due, respect to whom respect is due, honor to whom honor is due." (*Rom 13:7*) Also, "it is the *duty of citizens* to contribute along with the civil authorities to the good of society in a spirit of truth, justice, solidarity, and freedom. The love and service of *one's country* follow from the duty of gratitude and belong to the order of charity." (2239) When Caesar and God are in opposition, let us remember that our true citizenship is in Heaven. (*Phil 3:20*) "The citizen is obliged in conscience not to follow the directives of civil authorities when they are contrary to the demands of the moral order, to the fundamental rights of persons or the teachings of the Gospel. *Refusing obedience* to civil authorities, when their demands are contrary to those of an upright conscience, finds its justification in the distinction between serving God and serving the political community." (2242) The Church cautions: "With-out the light the Gospel sheds on God and man, societies easily become totalitarian." (2257)