

# **IN THE WORLD BUT NOT OF THE WORLD: ORTHODOX CHRISTIANITY AND AMERICAN CITIZENSHIP**

**Homily for the Vespers of the Feast of the Apostle Paul**

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It is wonderful to be back here in Irvine, and especially to be back at St. Paul's. This is a very special community, as those of you who have been in other Orthodox communities well realize. Thank you so much for extending to me this invitation, which has given me the chance to return to a parish I love very much.

The Apostle Paul, from whom this parish takes its name and whose feast day we celebrate this evening and tomorrow, was a citizen of the Roman Empire, not through a process of naturalization, as we would call it today, but rather, as he proudly stated to a centurion in Acts 22.28, "I am Roman born". This was not the only time Paul called upon his Roman citizenship; most notably, in Acts 25 and 26, he appealed to the emperor as his right, and even received beforehand a hearing from King Agrippa. Yet this same Apostle Paul, so proud of his Roman citizenship, so ready to use it as a defense and refuge from persecution, also lost his appeal to Caesar and was sentenced to death for refusing to renounce his Christian faith, which was deemed unpatriotic and treasonous.

How are we to understand such contradictory assertions and actions? The United States has no formal state religion, so we do not face the threat that ended Paul's life of being considered treasonous simply because of our beliefs. On the other hand, does our Orthodox Christian conscience push us to act and speak out in ways that are viewed negatively by the American

public? Is it possible to be a good citizen and yet be considered unpatriotic? Conversely, does good citizenship mean compromising our Orthodox Christian ethics? Since our national elections are only a couple of weeks away, I want to speak to you tonight about how we as Orthodox Christians may responsibly negotiate the political landscape of American society. I have titled my homily, “In the World but not Of the World: Orthodox Christianity and American Citizenship.”

Strong relationships between church and state are nothing new to church history; although, as the experience of St. Paul and most of the other apostles demonstrates, they were far from strong for the first three centuries of Christianity’s existence. However, since the Roman Emperor Constantine legalized Christianity through his Edict of Toleration in 312, the Church has enjoyed a privileged and powerful role in most predominantly Christian countries and societies. Even in some non-Christian societies, the Church has exercised broad political powers: in the Ottoman Empire, for example, ecclesiastical courts tried civil cases involving Christians, and Orthodox bishops – particularly the Ecumenical Patriarch – were responsible for collecting the taxes to be paid by Christians to the Turkish sultan.

The consequences of close and formal relations between church and state have been mixed: on the one hand, this affiliation in Christian countries and empires has given the Church valuable financial and political support to pursue such important ministries as evangelism. On the other hand, the overweening influence of the state in the life of the Church has, over the years, resulted in the destruction and outlawing of icons, several forced attempts at reunion with the Church of Rome on entirely Roman Catholic terms, and the constant deposition and election of patriarchs under Ottoman rule just so the sultan could accumulate more wealth through the enormous bribes patriarchs paid to get elected.

The United States has provided a new environment for the Orthodox Church, one which confronts us with both challenges and opportunities. We are challenged by our loss of a position of privilege, both in terms of exercising official power and influence and in terms of providing for the spiritual needs of our faithful. Instead, as a Christian church of a minority confession in America's pluralistic society, we must compete in a religious marketplace where our "brand" is often unknown and, even when known, is frequently perceived as outdated. On the other hand, we also are free of the oft-times damaging intrusions into church affairs of governmental leaders for their own political purposes.

This does not mean that Christianity, or any other religion, is required to be mute in the public sphere. Far from it! If we examine the historical record, we can easily identify a number of important public policies (usually positive ones) which were enacted into law and implemented due, at least in part, to the strong support of Christian churches for these policies: the abolition of slavery, the extension of the vote to women, Prohibition, and the civil rights legislation of the 1960's are perhaps the most notable examples. Our own church's leader, the late Archbishop Iakovos, walked side-by-side with Martin Luther King, Jr., at the march from Selma to Montgomery. His actions – for which, I am ashamed to say, he was castigated by many of our own Orthodox faithful – is a model to all of us, demonstrating our responsibility to provide a prophetic witness and speak out on public policy issues from our Orthodox Christian perspective. The prophets, if you recall from the Old Testament, did not engage in divination *à la* Alison DuBois on NBC's *Medium*. Rather, they challenged their society to fulfill God's commandments *as a society*, and warned their people of the consequences they faced otherwise.

In 1891, Pope Leo XIII issued an encyclical responding to the economic and political context of his day; he affirmed both the rights of business owners to their property and the rights of

workers to organize and bargain collectively. Forty years later, Pope Pius XI affirmed and expanded Leo's call in his own encyclical, reminding business owners of the obligations attendant upon the right of ownership, including the right of workers to a wage sufficient to support them *and* their families, what today we call a living wage. As with Martin Luther King in the United States in the 1960's, or Gandhi in India in the 1940's, these popes stood as prophetic voices, challenging the various constituencies of their society from their religious and moral convictions.

Unfortunately, the past decade or so in American politics has seen a dramatic shift in the discourse and relationship between church and state. Several prominent Christian leaders, while not running for office themselves, have become involved in the political arena in a new way. Rather than speaking prophetically to the American people on public policy issues from a Christian perspective, they have decided – based on two or three specific issues – to anoint a political party as the “Christian party” and have confidently proclaimed to their parishioners and other faithful followers who the “Christian candidates” are. One of the most well-known Protestant figures actually stated, during the 2004 campaign season, that anyone who was a good Christian had to vote Republican. Unfortunately, many in the Republican Party have embraced this anointing and propelled it forward by demonizing their Democratic opponents. Equally unfortunately, many in the Democratic Party have responded by studiously avoiding any mention of faith and religion in their own political rhetoric. There are individual exceptions to both of these characterizations, of course – for example, Senators John McCain and Barak Obama, respectively – but I believe this is a fair description of the overall political picture.

Fortunately, a few religious leaders have sought to regain for American Christians the high ground of prophetic witness without partisanship. Probably the most high-profile among these

has been Jim Wallis, an evangelical Christian minister devoted to anti-poverty work, founder of Sojourners and their associated periodical, and author of *God's Politics: Why the Right is Wrong and the Left Doesn't Get It*. As his title suggests, Wallis operates from a “plague on both your houses” approach. On the one hand, he criticizes those on the Christian right for supporting a political party on the basis of a few, biblically-insignificant issues, such as abortion and homosexuality, while willfully ignoring the party’s lack of commitment to such overwhelming biblical imperatives as society’s obligation to the poor and other marginalized members of society. At the same time, Wallis condemns the Democratic Party’s tendency deliberately to ignore the moral and religious roots of many of its own policy desiderata, and to marginalize those party members whose religious convictions lead them to take political positions – against abortion on demand, e.g. – that are contrary to the party’s platform.

Jim Wallis’ critique is seconded by a new book entitled *Tempting Faith*, authored by David Kuo, former assistant director of the White House Office of Faith-Based Initiatives. Kuo, an evangelical with years of experience in anti-poverty work, details his disillusionment at discovering that, despite President Bush’s evangelical faith, politics trumped faith in the White House, from funding commitments that failed to materialize to the politically-motivated geographical placement of informational programs in order to increase the Republican vote in key races. Kuo is now calling on Christians to take a step back from politics and reexamine their priorities and commitments.

David Kuo is both right and wrong. He is right insofar as he now recognizes the danger of Christian affiliation and identification with a particular political party. There *is* no “Christian party.” Neither the Democratic nor the Republican Party is consistently pro-life. Those Roman Catholic clergy and bishops who advocate that their parishioners vote for anti-abortion

candidates, for example, appear to have forgotten that their church also opposes the death penalty and that the Pope very clearly condemned the invasion of Iraq – which has cost hundreds of thousands of Iraqi lives, not to mention several thousand American ones – as an unjust war. Conversely, many Democrats pursue pro-choice policies which would not “encumber” women with a one-day delay or pre-procedure counseling, so that many of these women are not fully informed of alternatives and are doomed to carry for years afterward the heavy spiritual burden of knowing they ended the life in their own womb.

Orthodox ethicist Vigen Guroian is flatly opposed to any overly-close relationship between church and state – and, by extension, church and political parties – precisely because such a relationship constitutes “a new form of surrender of the Church’s free identity and mission to a historic social order” (*Incarnate Love*, p. 160), which compromises the Church’s prophetic witness and mission to society as a whole. In a chapter entitled “Orthodoxy and the American Order” in his seminal work, *Incarnate Love*, Guroian identifies such a church as collapsing into a “civil religion,” and warns that

... the catholic [i.e., “universal”] and evangelical aspirations of the American churches are transmuted into loyalties to the national purpose and redefined as spiritual service to the nation. Of course, the agreement is one which places no obligation upon the civil authority to regard the Church as in any sense an equal. (ibid.)

In his book *All the Fulness of God*, Fr. Thomas Hopko, former dean of St. Vladimir’s Orthodox Theological Seminary, expressed similar concern, warning against our identifying Christianity with a specific political ideology:

Christ is not a socialist or a capitalist, a monarchist or a democrat, a communist or a fascist. He accepts no other vision of human life than His own. He does not condescend to error, or commiserate with stupidity, or make accommodation with lies, wherever they are found. And human beings are called to accept His vision and nobody else’s. This is their only recourse to “sanity” and their only salvation

from the snares of the deceivers, on the right hand and on the left, including the deceivers who cover their deceit with His name. (p. 175)

Jim Wallis and other religious leaders asserted in full-page advertisements they took out in the *New York Times* and other prominent newspapers prior to the 2004 election, “God is not a Republican ... and he’s not a Democrat, either.” To prove their point, Wallis and his colleagues listed a number of public policy issues and accompanied these with relevant biblical citations.

The list, while not exhaustive, reminds us that *this* is where we need to be as Christians, and especially as a Church, acting in the political arena. You see, while Kuo was right about the dangers of identifying Christianity with a particular political party or a particular political leader, he was wrong to encourage Christians to step back from politics. As Orthodox Christians, we have a responsibility to do what we can to keep God’s commandments not only in our private lives but also as members of a society, and to encourage our society as a whole to act in a way pleasing to God. Since we live in a country where we choose our political leaders and where our leaders’ decisions and actions are influenced by what we tell them, we have an obligation to emphasize to them the ethical consequences of certain policies and our own concern to “seek justice, relieve the oppressed, judge the fatherless, plead for the widow. (Is. 1:17).”

This does not mean forcing our Orthodox Christian morals on all Americans. As Vigen Guroian has pointed out, God’s kingdom is in no way to be identified with this country or any other society on earth. Indeed, we Orthodox have a “now and not yet” eschatology (*eschatology* is the theology of the end times). On the one hand, God will bring this creation to an end and inaugurate a new age at a time and in a manner not of our choosing (by the way, that means that our foreign policy with respect to the nation of Israel is not going to speed along this end, which God can handle very well without any help of our part). We most certainly do *not* support the “rapture” eschatology of Tim LeHaye’s *Left Behind* series, with its depiction of a God and

Christians who essentially abandon the world for a period of time. (You can enjoy it as fiction, but don't accept its theological premises any more than you would accept the fake church history in Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code*.)

On the other hand, while God's kingdom is clearly "not yet", there is a partial "now" dimension to our eschatology which requires that we take the responsibility to speak and act in the public arena out of our Orthodox Christian context. When we see injustice being perpetrated by our government, or when we see businesses or individuals engaging in immoral and unethical conduct that is damaging others, when we see people without food, shelter or medical care, we have both a political right and, more importantly, a moral responsibility to voice our concerns in the public sphere and to act with others to effect change. This may mean working with various non-governmental organizations and agencies, including those of our Church, such as IOCC (International Orthodox Christian Charities), and/or it may mean advocacy for or, conversely, opposition to, certain legislation or governmental policies.

So, we are called to speak out and to act, based on our Orthodox Christian convictions. However, we must at the same time be aware of two important caveats. First, people may legitimately disagree on how ethical or "Christian" a particular policy or law is. Thus, one person may advocate a particular policy from her own understanding of the underlying ethics, while someone else may oppose it from an equally strong ethical stance. Secondly, while we may, as individuals, choose to join a particular political party, it is *never* proper for the Church to anoint a political party as the "Christian" one, and it is incumbent upon those of us active in partisan politics to provide a prophetic witness, within our own parties, to those aspects of our party's policies which we recognize as or believe to be non-Christian. We must be careful that our differences with other Christians on important policy matters really *do* spring from a strong

Christian moral imperative. In fact, as David Kuo's experience illustrates, perhaps the most common danger for politically-active Christians is the failure to keep our Christian ethics and imperatives foremost in our minds and therefore to set aside partisan loyalty in order *always* to advocate from a Christian moral stance. It is both unfortunate and ironic, for instance, that so many of those who wear the "WWJD" logo ("What Would Jesus Do?") easily set that sentiment aside when it is politically inconvenient to be reminded of it.

Scripture teaches us that all human beings are created according to the image of God, and God loves all of us. The "us versus them" mentality of current partisan politics and of much of international relations is in direct opposition to this truth. We cannot allow ourselves to be sucked into the political maelstrom of caricaturing, denigration, demonization, and, above all, self-righteous arrogance. The reality is that the political world requires compromise and choices that are often the lesser of two evils.

As Orthodox, we are members of a Christian tradition which has always recognized that reality while never sanctifying it. Even in the Byzantine Empire, praised by many Orthodox for its *symphonia* – its "symphony" or concord – between church and state, the Church often had to draw the line between its ethical stand and the activities of the empire. For example, Orthodoxy never developed a just war theology. This is why the Byzantine Empire never invaded other countries or territories. It sought only to defend its own territories or to reclaim former territories which had been conquered by its enemies. And, even with this type of self-defense policy, the Orthodox Church still would not allow its clergy to take up arms, nor would it canonize as martyrs those who died in battle, even when the enemy was non-Christian. Rather, St. Basil the Great actually prescribed a period of three years' penance for soldiers returning from war because they had taken human lives. (As an aside, I would note that such penance, combined

with spiritual direction, is probably more psychologically, emotionally, and spiritually healing to returning soldiers traumatized by the violence they've experienced than is a simplistic attitude of "Welcome home, good job.")

As Orthodox Christians in a democratic nation, we must take active part in the political process which shapes the policies and actions of our nation. At the same time, as Orthodox Christians, we must always be aware that no political leader's or party's policies and activities are uniformly Christian in substance. Therefore, both the Church as the Body of Christ and all of us as members of that Body must maintain a *consistent* prophetic Christian witness which applauds compassionate, caring political activities and policymakers, but which also just as readily critiques those activities and policies which are not deeply rooted in Orthodox Christian ethics.

What does this mean in terms of the ballots we will each be casting in less than two weeks? Sorry, as tonight's homilist and an Orthodox Christian theologian, I'm not going to tell you for whom you should vote. (As a concerned citizen, however, I'll be happy to share my opinions with you afterward.) No, each one of us must decide this. Each of us must carefully examine in our hearts what Christ tells us God expects of us as Christians and what the prophets tell us God expects of a godly society, and then choose as best we are able. And, even then, we are not done. We must work – within our parties, through non-profit, non-governmental agencies, and/or through the Church herself – to witness to a society based on a Christian ethic of love, compassion, healing, respect, and stewardship. We must do as the Apostle Paul did: speak and act as good and patriotic *Christian* citizens, always keeping in mind that some may see our Christianity at opposition with our patriotism and citizenship, but holding ourselves to the standards of our Christian faith above all else, as did St. Paul, to the point of giving up his life.