

To Be American. To Be Catholic. Which comes first?

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Q: Back when I went to Catholic school, and later when I served in the military, I was taught that when it came to serving our country, I need to be an American first and a Catholic second.

A: Thank you very much for bringing up this issue. Even more, thank you for your service to our country in the United States Military. All of us have a duty to serve our nation, whether as a soldier (as you did) or as citizens in whatever state in life we find ourselves.

In fact, the ancient Greeks considered serving their nation (patriotism) a matter of justice. Patriotism is not merely a feeling one gets on the Fourth of July (as I'm sure many of those who have served our country in the military would attest), it is an obligation. We actually owe, as a matter of justice, a debt to our country. How is patriotism a matter of justice? Well, we are living in this country and as a consequence owe a certain debt to the nation that provides us with education, formation, and opportunity. Immigrants owe a debt to their adopted country for the security and potential for stability it provides. We all owe obedience to our nation.

This idea is not something exclusive to Greek culture. Even the Bible attests to this. In his Letter to the Romans, Saint Paul wrote to those Christians about the need to obey the Roman Empire (Romans 13:1ff). Jesus Himself obeyed the Roman government when He was asked about paying the Temple tax (Matthew 17:22ff.). Again, we even seem to have a Biblical duty to obey all lawful authority.

For those of us living in the United States, this is relatively easy. The founding of our country was based in large part on Judeo-Christian principles and values. Therefore, generally speaking, we can live as Americans and as Catholics and experience very little conflict. We can even live our faith without anyone hardly noticing at all (which may or may not be a good thing).

But what happens when our obligations to our nation and the obligations to our God come into conflict? What are we first: Americans or Catholics?

Unequivocally, we are Catholics first. We have a duty to act as patriots. But patriotism is not the highest form of justice. What we owe to God far outstrips the duty we owe to our country. The Greeks maintained that religion was a higher form of justice than patriotism. This is simply logical. If God is the source of all truth and all good, then nations ought to be based on that truth and goodness. Even the Declaration of Independence refers to the Founding Fathers' need to submit to a higher authority in the rebellion against King George. They wrote that they were "appealing to the Supreme Judge of the world for the rectitude of [their] intentions." They knew that if the Revolution was in violation of God's law, it would neither be good nor just.

Our nation has authority over us, but that authority is not absolute. We have a duty to serve our nation, but that duty is not absolute. Our country can be in the wrong. In those cases, we must "obey God rather than men" (Acts of the Apostles 5:29). Would we honor the German Catholic soldier who was just "doing his duty" and turning poisonous gas on innocent Jews at Auschwitz? No. He should have actually acted on the Faith he professed and, if need be, been shot for treason. Should we honor an American Catholic who simply "goes to work" or "goes to the voting booth" and is more "American" than "Catholic"? No. We should honor those who make decisions in their lives based on the Faith we profess.

Does this mean that we need to rise up and revolt? It does not. It means that, as the Letter to the Hebrews says, we "strive to live at peace with all men" (Hebrew 12:14). But we belong to Christ first.

Does this sound extreme? It shouldn't. This isn't radical Christianity; this is Christianity 101. It is radically different than what we might be used to, but it isn't extremism. At least not to anyone who has read the Gospels. This is the bare minimum requirements. This is simply what we are called to be: disciples of Christ before everything else. Everything.

Now, before anyone goes off about how naïve or young or “extreme” I am, I didn’t make this up. Jesus Himself laid down the conditions for being His disciple. And among those conditions is choosing Him before every other relationship. Not only before your citizenship, but also family. “If any one comes to me without hating his father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple” (Luke 14:26).

Do I do this myself? Poorly. Are we striving for it? Hopefully. Do we fail at it? Occasionally. Is it worth trying to live this way? Definitely.