

Twenty-ninth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Dear Parishioners and friends,

The pandemic has made us all, regardless of which country we inhabit, more conscious than ever before of the state. The state has intervened in the lives of every citizen or subject to a degree that none of us has ever experienced before. With a view to protecting the viability of our health service infrastructure, so as not to overcrowd our hospitals or overburden our doctors, nurses and health workers, the state – having learned some important lessons from the first wave of Covid – 19 in the spring and early summer – is doing everything it can to flatten the curve of a second pandemic wave. We are aware of the way the state is shoring up our economies, how it is managing our schools and universities, and how it is taking on responsibilities and giving itself rights that none of us has experienced before. Many have turned to the churches in this time of crisis and found them silent or muzzled by the strictures of state regulation. The feelings of even the most benign of us in regard to the state we have encountered since the spring of 2020 are, to say the least, ambivalent.

In many European countries now the Church has receded to the side-lines of society, or it may be active underneath the radar and to positive effect. We know that Vatican II recalibrated the relationship between the Church and society and cast the Church more as a prophetic presence than an opposing force. Many in months to come will be reading the encyclical of Pope Francis, *Fratelli Tutti*, in terms the emergent relationship between Church and society inspired by Vatican II. For much of the history of Christianity the relationship between Church and State occupied centre stage, and for much of that time it was the Church that found itself in the more powerful position.

The twin loyalties we all possess between patriotic duty and the gospel values that we as Christians embrace, highlighted by the tension between Church and State, go back to the dawn of Christian history. This tension was particularly acute in the Palestine in which Jesus lived and launched his public ministry. Those who were hostile to him or who felt threatened by his message tried to catch him out precisely on the issue of how we should handle the claims the state makes on us. Remember that Palestine was occupied by the forces of the Roman Empire, taxes were paid to the emperor, the religious loyalties of the people were stretched to breaking point, all that the state represented was resented and hated by devout Jews. Nonetheless Jesus' answer to the trick question not only got him out of being trapped by the Pharisees but defined relations between Christianity and the state authorities wherever the gospel was preached, Christian communities flourished and the Church took root. The legitimacy of the state, the claims it makes on its citizens are not called into question by Jesus. But he does point out that a greater claim on our loyalty comes from God. He squares the circle by insisting: *render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's*. At a moment of history where the state is so present in our lives and makes such unprecedented claims on us, it is essential that we also remember that we have duties towards God, regardless of how the pandemic has altered the world in which we live.

Father Patrick