

Discipleship versus Citizenship

In Acts of the Apostles 4:1–14, Peter and John are arrested by the temple guard at the request of the priests and the Sadducees. These leaders are disturbed by what the two Apostles were teaching the people—namely that in Christ, there is the resurrection of the dead. The next day Peter and John are brought before the Sanhedrin and asked by what power or by what name they had healed. The crippled beggar whom they had healed in Christ's name a day earlier stands by them as a testament to the healing power of Christ. His presence there leaves the Sanhedrin speechless.

Peter and John, however, are anything but speechless, boldly pronouncing Christ's Resurrection and proclaiming Christ as the cornerstone upon which our salvation is built. In the Roman world of that day, these words held great significance, for at that time salvation was typically connected with the Roman emperor. Moreover, the Sanhedrin, while ultimately under Roman rule, still maintained authority over the Jewish People. The proclamations of Peter and John were perceived as a threat to their power, particularly when one considers that it was this very council that handed Jesus over to Pilate just weeks earlier. If the crucified Jesus is now the resurrected, life-giving Christ, then the foundation upon which their authority has been built will surely begin to crumble.

Peter and John's willingness to challenge the authorities of their time, choosing to listen to God instead of man, is an example of authentic discipleship. They know they cannot remain silent and passively accept the rule of the local religious and political authorities because of what they have "seen and heard" regarding the Risen Christ (see 4:20–21).

We are invited to embrace the same sort of discipleship in our own lives as Catholics. At times the demands of discipleship will come into conflict with the realities of citizenship, as they did for Peter and John. At these times it will be difficult for us to live out our values and beliefs truly, because they are in conflict with commonly accepted cultural values and even the laws of our land.

Over the past several years, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) has spoken out on the challenges of "faithful citizenship," helping Catholics to learn more about their responsibilities in public life. Asserting that it is possible to answer the dual calling of faith and citizenship, the USCCB urges all Catholics to vote and to become actively involved in public and political life. By doing so, we have the opportunity to be voices that demand the protection of human life and dignity and push for the advancement of the common good. Through our efforts we may discover that politics and religion, citizenship and discipleship, don't always mix well with one another, particularly when we discover that no political party consistently shares the same concerns we do. Despite this reality, we must remain willing to challenge the leaders of our government to make compassionate, just, and moral decisions that authentically reflect Gospel values. Indeed, if we want to be true disciples, it will be impossible for us not to do so.

(This article is adapted from James Spillman, campus minister, Xaverian Brothers High School, Westwood, Massachusetts.)

