

Citizens of the Kingdom¹

Citizenship lessons became compulsory for secondary pupils in UK schools in 2002. The national curriculum website explains that:

Pupils learn about their rights, responsibilities, duties and freedoms and about laws, justice and democracy. It helps young people to develop their decision-making and critical skills as they consider a wide range of political, social, ethical and moral problems.

The Citizenship Foundation website says:

The principal justification for citizenship education derives from the nature of democracy. Democracies need active, informed and responsible citizens – citizens who are willing and able to take responsibility for themselves and their communities and contribute to the political process. These capacities do not develop unaided. They have to be learned. While a certain amount of citizenship may be picked up through ordinary experience in the home or at work, it can never in itself be sufficient to equip citizens for the sort of active role required of them in today's complex and diverse society.

At about the same time the government introduced a citizenship test for anyone requesting British nationality. By definition, a citizen is “a person owing loyalty to, and entitled by birth or naturalisation to the protection of the state. Citizenship is “the status of a citizen with its attendant duties, rights and privileges. But what makes a good citizen?

The answer would be all of the above and a lot more besides. It would include respect for the law and society's values enshrined in that law; contributing to society through work, education, social and even, perhaps, political involvement; paying taxes (as unpopular as they may be); exercising the right to vote; having respect for other people and a concern for their welfare and well-being... and so the list goes on. I don't think we think too much about it really. As citizens we just “are”, it just happens, but that may not always be enough, or good enough, because citizenship requires active commitment and involvement, it's something we have to support and invest ourselves in. If we don't, then it should bring to mind the quote from Groucho Marx that he would refuse to join any club that would have him for a member!

What has all of this got to do with things spiritual or pastoral you may be wondering? Well there's one obvious link and that is the importance to us of the freedom to worship (or not) as citizens and, perhaps also, our right to defend the Christian roots of our society – as well as not forcing them on others – and not having other faith values forced on us or the apologetics of faithless political

¹ This paper was prompted by a recent Jayne Dowle column in the *Yorkshire Post*.

correctness. The less obvious link, and one which I would now like to explore, is the fact that, as Christians, we have dual-citizenship because we are also citizens of God's kingdom.

So, what does it mean to be a citizen of God's kingdom?

In *Christifideles Laici* ("The Vocation and the Mission of the Lay Faithful in the Church and in the World") Pope John Paul said – and here we have a basic definition of our duties as citizens of the kingdom:

Life according to the Spirit, whose fruit is holiness, stirs up every baptized person and requires each to follow and imitate Jesus Christ, in embracing the Beatitudes, in listening and meditating on the Word of God, in conscious and active participation in the liturgical and sacramental life of the Church, in personal prayer, in family or in community, in the hunger and thirst for justice, in the practice of the commandment of love in all circumstances of life, and in service to our brothers and sisters, especially the least, the poor and the suffering.
(para 16)

Most of us attended citizenship classes. Those who went to Catholic schools had about ten or eleven years of Catholic education, a steady daily input of what it meant to be a Catholic. It didn't have much to do with rights as such (not only because we were children but also because that isn't a concept we equate with our faith – a point I'll come back to later) so much as with our duties and responsibilities under God's law and the laws of the Church. As children we were on a faith journey marked out by the milestones of the sacraments we celebrated along the way and, little by little, coming to a fuller knowledge of what being a Catholic meant and what it required of us.

St Paul said, "When I was a child, I used to talk like a child, and think like a child, and argue like a child, but now I am grown, all childish ways are put behind me" [1Cor 13 v 11]. Just as in the world around us we take on more and more responsibilities as we become adults, so it should be with our membership of the Church. Little by little we discover – or we should do – that being a Catholic Christian, being a member of the Church, and therefore being a citizen of the kingdom, is more about doing than just being.

Let's just take one sentence from the paragraph quoted earlier and change a word here and there to apply it to the Church: "The Church needs active, informed and responsible members who are willing and able to take responsibility for themselves and their faith community and contribute to its life." Little by little more and more opportunity opens up for us to be actively involved in the life of the Church through various aspects of service and ministry and membership of pastoral groups and organisations. This enriches and strengthens the foundations of our faith so that, nourished by the Eucharist,

we then go out into the world to bear witness to our faith - “Go in peace to love and serve the Lord” – helping to build up the kingdom by bringing others to find out more about this person Jesus who is at the centre of our lives.

Ultimately - and we should make no apologies for this - the aim of all we try to do in love and service of the gospel and in the practice of our faith is our personal salvation. I referred earlier to the fact that we don’t tend to consider that we have any rights as citizens of the kingdom, and yet we do. We have a right to the ministry of the Church, and we have a right to be saved - not a right we demand, but a right that we can claim because it has been obtained for us, won for us, by Our Lord and is now available to us. We claim our “right” by living right(ly), living well as good citizens, hoping to be found worthy of eternal life in God’s kingdom. Salvation, however, isn’t just a personal quest, a race for sanctification, but is something we share and live out in the community of the Church which is the body of Christ. We strive for sainthood together, and our hope is for as many as possible to come to knowledge of Christ and so be saved.

We said above that: “While a certain amount of citizenship may be picked up through ordinary experience in the home or at work, it can never in itself be sufficient to equip citizens for the sort of active role required of them in today’s complex and diverse society.” The same can be said of our citizenship of heaven. Many people would claim to believe in God but wouldn’t consider themselves to be “religious” as such. Many more wouldn’t claim even that much and yet live good lives according to a moral code that is, perhaps, more instinctive than denominational. Neither of these situations is good enough for us, however, as citizens of the kingdom. We have to be more committed than that. We have to stand up and be counted. We need to put our “x” firmly in the box of our choice for God and the things of God. It’s that old question that if it were a crime to be a Christian (and it sometimes seems as if it will be soon), would there be enough evidence to convict us?

The society around us operates according to social mores – accepted practices and customs that are considered necessary for its survival and the well-being of its citizens. There is also “natural law”, a moral code that derives from an instinctive sense of right and wrong. These are generally the basis of the formally enacted laws of our legal system. In addition we, as citizens of God’s kingdom, have to follow what he says is right and reject what isn’t, and we take our lead from his word in scripture and from the teaching of the Church he founded of which we are members. Whilst we are aware of our duty to uphold and keep the law of the land:

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.

Their loyal collaboration includes the right, and at times the duty, to voice their criticisms of that which seems harmful to the dignity of persons and to the good of the community.²

We are citizens of the state by virtue of our nationality, but we are also citizens of the kingdom of God by virtue of our baptism. We have a birth certificate issued by the state, but we also have a rebirth certificate issued by the Church. We have duties and responsibilities both as citizens of the state and as citizens of the kingdom of God and we must be prepared for the fact that they may not always be complementary. For us, God is the higher authority. The Catechism cites the letter of an unknown second-century author written to a certain Diognetus in defence of the Christian faith in which he says:

[Christians] reside in their own nations, but as resident aliens. They participate in all things as citizens and endure all things as foreigners. They obey the established laws but their way of life surpasses the laws. So noble is the position to which God has assigned them that they are not allowed to desert it.³

Our pursuit of the things that make for good citizenship in God's kingdom will help to build up the unity of the body of Christ, the Church, and, as we said earlier, will provide a firmer foundation from which to bring the gospel message to that more general, earthly, citizenship which is all around us and of which we are also a part. However, the bottom line for us is summed up by St Paul:

Our homeland is in heaven. [Phil 3 v 20]

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² *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, para's 2242 & 2238

³ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, para 2240