

## 29<sup>th</sup> Week of Ordinary Time

“Greg Sanders once stalked his chief nemesis, an otter nicknamed Phoky, for 24 days. When Sanders, a U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service biologist, finally captured the critter at Southern California's Anacapa Island, he shipped Phoky north to Monterey under an ambitious federal program to preserve otters while protecting shellfish divers from natural competition. But within six months, Phoky was back in forbidden waters. He was one of dozens of otters that surprised government biologists at almost every turn. Now, it seems, officials are throwing in the towel. In an admission that the otters refuse to respect boundaries imposed by man, authorities will abandon their otter-relocation policy.

Now, since I must abide by the stern warning proffered by both ecclesiastical and civil authorities to keep politics out of church, the legacy of these otters might assist us in addressing the issues facing us Americans even as we hear in today's gospel passage Jesus saying to the Pharisees, “Repay to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God.” (Matthew 22:21) Indeed, as the 2008 presidential campaign approaches its November 4th climax, it seems an impossible task to leave outside the church door all that is smattered across every possible venue of mass media. It also seems an irresponsible task for a preacher to avoid the very topic that has so captured the hearts and minds of U.S. citizens. And so today I propose to consider Phoky and his impish otter comrades, “the slick-furred creatures [that] refuse to respect boundaries imposed by man.” These playful creatures who don't give a hoot who the next American president is have much to offer us in these last days of pre-election hysteria.

It seems that no matter how much energy the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service puts into the project of otter relocation, the critters simply refuse to accept imposed barriers that contradict their nature. There's something in them, something of God's creation, which refuses to honor a false dichotomy: okay to swim in one bit of ocean, not okay in another. “The sea is ours, all of it,” they might claim could they speak. “God made us for this.”

In a scene nearly as impish as sea otters at play, we find Jesus and the Pharisees sparring in conversation, the plotting Pharisees resolute in their determination to entrap Jesus in the sin of blasphemy. But he is too clever for their tricks. Refusing to acknowledge an artificial distinction between the things of heaven and the things of earth, Jesus mischievously replies, “Repay to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God.” (Matthew 22:21) In short, Jesus dismisses the Pharisees and their trick question with a laugh and a joke. Left unsaid, of course, is the greater truth: civil matters are most certainly heaven's concern, including Caesar and the coin which bears his image. So give to Caesar what is his rightful due, but remember that even the great Caesar will one day have to give to God an accounting of his earthly stewardship.

The interplay of religion and politics can be really messy; it's been especially so this year with the Catholic hierarchy dueling regularly with candidates of both parties over a wide variety of moral issues. What is a Catholic voter supposed to do? I offer only the simplest answer: look up before casting your ballot.

For quite a few years now, St. Joseph Center, home to 35 of us Brothers and Priests of Holy Cross, has been a designated polling place. In our rural community, I guess our spacious facility is the building best able to accommodate the crowds and their cars on election day. And so it is that whenever elections are held, our neighbors flock to us to cast a vote for Caesar, dutifully giving him his due even as some stop in our chapel beforehand to give God his.

In the basement conference room where election officials have unfurled and affixed to the wall an American flag, little attention seems to have been paid to the large crucifix that stands as witness to the proceedings. Tables have been set up for the initial checking in of registered voters and compact curtained booths stand at the ready. Yes indeed, Caesar is ready to get his. And above it all, affixed to the wall, is the crucifix, reminder of the greater power.

So, this November 4th, just what are we Catholic voters supposed to do? Firstly, remember the otters [who] refuse to respect boundaries imposed by man.” They seem to know better than we that it’s nonsense to erect artificial boundaries between the things of heaven and the things of earth. Secondly, remember the oft-repeated words from the Lord’s Prayer, “Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done on earth.” Indeed, it’s our Christian responsibility to continue building the heavenly kingdom here on earth, and we elect civil leaders to guide us in its construction. Finally, remember to look up before casting your ballot. Maybe there’ll be a crucifix on the wall, maybe not. Either way, we pray God direct us as we seek, through our elected leaders, to make a positive difference in the world.