

29th Sunday of Ordinary Time

The Pharisees went off
and plotted how they might entrap Jesus in speech.
They sent their disciples to him, with the Herodians, saying,
"Teacher, we know that you are a truthful man
and that you teach the way of God in accordance with the truth.
And you are not concerned with anyone's opinion,
for you do not regard a person's status.
Tell us, then, what is your opinion:
Is it lawful to pay the census tax to Caesar or not?"
Knowing their malice, Jesus said,
"Why are you testing me, you hypocrites?
Show me the coin that pays the census tax."
Then they handed him the Roman coin.
He said to them, "Whose image is this and whose inscription?"
They replied, "Caesar's."
At that he said to them,
"Then repay to Caesar what belongs to Caesar
and to God what belongs to God."

Mt 22:15-21

"Then repay to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God."

The task seems relatively simple. I just need to look at my life and order it into two columns: one is Caesar's and one is God's. So here it goes.

What belongs to Caesar. I obviously understand that when he says that, he means our worldly involvement. We are not Roman citizens after all. So what is my worldly involvement? I do render to Caesar what belongs to Caesar. First of all, I pay taxes. I don't commit any crime, and I obey the speed limits (most of the time). I try to teach kids to follow these rules too, because our community has to function somehow. I worry very much about elections. I try to learn about the candidates and about the political system. I debate with all my friends and neighbors on political issues, and I try to have thoughtful opinions on things that seem important. I feel patriotic from time to time, and when the time comes, if the time comes, I hope I will be ready to serve my community in whatever capacity I can. I see the weaknesses of my society; I am annoyed by them and even angered by some. I am not uncritical. I care. Occasionally, I help the weaker and the poor, and I do try to be polite in public. I worry what the world will look like after us, what we will leave to our children, what kind of a world they will inherit. I even belong to some popular organizations. I give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar.

What belongs to God. I pray. I go to Church. I give money to my parish. Sometimes I read a spiritual book. I support Catholic education, and I send checks regularly to a couple of charities. I am annoyed by some priests and bishops, but only because I care. If I remember, I pray for the dead. I wish I had more time to do it better.

What else should I do? What do they want me to do? What does Jesus want me to do? Vote with some “Catholic block,” support somebody that I don’t like but who might seem “more Catholic,” or not vote at all? Get involved more? I don’t know.

Here my neat distinction of those two columns falls apart. When I am honest with myself, I know very well that I cannot simply give to God what belongs to God by doing things. Somewhere in the very center of my existence, I know that when he says “Give to God what belongs to God”, he appeals to my very being. He is searching for my freedom, my true love, my true fascination with Him. Just like He is fascinated with me. He loves me. I realize that I cannot dismiss Him by things: doing things, giving things. I have to become new. The amazing, wonderful logical trap that he set for the Pharisees and the Herodians shuts on me. I realize that this gospel is not just a clever teaching about “Church and State,” but another revelation of Divine Love.

“Give to God what belongs to God.” He gave me everything. He gave me every part of me. He gave me the ability to be happy. He gave me the happiness itself. He gave me this never-ending longing after eternity, after perfection, after holiness. And he is very much present in my life; He is constantly begging, constantly inviting. I know that the only response, the only non-hypocritical response to his words is, “Lord, you are my God, and let your presence penetrate everything I am and I do. Let every action, every decision, every moment of my life become a hymn to your glory.”