

The Pharisees and Herodians sought to trap Jesus and asked him if one should pay tax to an occupying government like the Romans. Jesus turned the question back on them by saying: “Repay to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God” (Mark 12:17).

Each person has a duty to contribute to the common good. We are called to respect civil authority, to pay taxes, and to “contribute along with the civil authorities to the good of society in a spirit of truth, justice, solidarity, and freedom” (CCC 2239). As citizens, we also have a moral obligation to exercise the right to vote and to defend one’s country. We are faced with many moral choices in life. In each choice, we are called to do what Jesus would do. We must speak the truth even when it is not popular. Ultimately, we must be willing to take a stand for God and to die for what we believe in.

June 1st is the Memorial of Justin Martyr. Justin was born in the province of Samaria around the year 100. He was not raised as a Christian but came to know the faith as a young man. “Justin had a life-changing encounter with an old man who urged him to study the Jewish prophets. He told Justin that these authors had not only spoken by God’s inspiration, but also predicted the coming of Christ and the foundation of his Church.”ⁱ The example and witness of this elder were compelling. Justin took a closer look at the claims of Christianity and chose to be baptized around age 30.

Saint Justin wrote many apologetic works to explain the Catholic faith. “Several of these works were written to Roman officials, for the purpose of refuting lies that had been told about the Church. Justin sought to convince the rulers of the Roman Empire that they had nothing to gain, and much to lose, by persecuting the Christians.”ⁱⁱ Around the year 150, Justin convinced Emperor Antonius Pius to regard the Church with greater tolerance. In 167, however, when persecution began again under Emperor Marcus Aurelius, Justin renewed his efforts. He “tried to demonstrate the injustice of the persecutions, and the superiority of the Catholic faith... Justin emphasized the strength of his convictions by stating that he expected to be put to death for expressing them.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Rusticus, a Roman prefect, asked Justin to recant his faith. In refusing to commit the sin of idolatry, Justin chose Christ and the martyr’s crown. “There is nothing which we more earnestly desire, than to endure torments for the sake of our Lord Jesus Christ... We are Christians and will never sacrifice to idols.”^{iv} Justin was tortured and beheaded along with six companions who testified to the truth of Christ rather than to submit to the yoke of tyranny.

In our own day and age, there are many brave witnesses to the faith who continue to bear witness with their very lives. Six years ago, the world was shocked when 21 Christians were martyred on a beach in Libya. “They had gone to work abroad to support their families: ordinary men, fathers of families, men with the desire to have children; men with the dignity of workers, who not only seek to bring home bread, but to bring it home with the dignity of work.”^v

As often happens in our violent world today, terrorists had captured them and demanded that they recant their faith in Jesus. They chose Christ instead. The Holy Spirit “gave them the strength and consistency to confess Jesus Christ to the point of shedding blood.”^{vi} We mourn their loss and are outraged at the senseless brutality. There is another part of us that must admire their commitment to Christ. They died saying: ‘Lord Jesus!’ — confessing the name of Jesus.”^{vii} As contemporary martyrs, they received the greatest gift a Christian can receive. In giving to God what belongs to God, they won the martyrs crown and are assured of eternal life.

The faithful witness of others challenges us to examine our own lives and our own commitment to Christ. Are you willing to “repay to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God” (Mark 12:17)?

ⁱ catholicnewsagency.com/news/22631/st-justin-martyr-patron-of-philosophers-honored-on-june-1

ⁱⁱ Ibid.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid.

^{iv} Ibid.

^v catholicnews.com/pope-marks-anniversary-of-christians-martyred-in-libya/

^{vi} Ibid.

^{vii} Ibid.