

Twenty-Ninth Sunday in Ordinary Time A
Is 45:1, 4-6; 1 Thes 1: 1-5; Mt 22: 15-21
October 22, 2023

I am certain we are all familiar with this Gospel passage. *“Repay to Caesar what belongs to Caesar,”* Jesus’ reply to the trick question is magnificent and subtle. *“Repay to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God.”*

Saint Matthew groups several questions together that were asked of Jesus in a series of “controversies” involving three groups of people who didn’t want much to do with each other. The Pharisees and Sadducees never got along. Their theologies and their beliefs were difficult. Neither of them got along with the Herodians who were supporters of King Herod and the Roman government and were perceived to be, and probably were, government agents. All three groups couldn’t stand each other, but they conspired together against Jesus.

Listen to the introduction to these three controversies. In today’s Gospel *“the Pharisees went off and began to plot how they might trap Jesus. They sent their disciples with Herodian sympathizers to him, who said .,.,”* A few verses later, “ *“Hearing that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees, the Pharisees got together and one of them asked....”* In all this, they were not acting in good faith but are interested only in controversy to discredit Jesus. There is a mentality like that alive today. There are individuals who come to church only to criticize what they see and hear. They will critique the music, the priest and the personnel of the various parish churches they visit on Sundays. Some don’t seem to belong to any parish, but live to criticize constantly; not really taking part in the Mass, but only judging the quality of

the liturgy and rating the priest's conduct and homily as material for their internet commentary. Constant critique can prevent the birth of serious fidelity to anything.

The question asked in the Gospel was a loaded one. If Jesus answered, *"Pay the tax,"* the Pharisees would brand him a traitor to the Jewish people. If he replied, *"Don't pay the tax,"* the Herodians would label him a traitor to Rome. Jesus recognizes the trap and gives the famous response that applied not only to that century, but to all centuries, *"Repay to Caesar what is Caesar's; repay to God what is God's."* The problem is which throne, which altar? Political parties come and go.

Jesus is saying that we have an obligation to Caesar (the government) and an obligation to God. Each generation has to work out the balance between the two. We can apply that to our time.

There is the issue of Church and State. Centuries ago, some people said that Church and State should be one. In the Middle Ages this was called, very graphically, "the union of throne and altar." Political parties ebb and flow in their power. We do not want any Church to be the arm of any political party. The opposite extreme is to say that not only should there not be a union of Church and State, but that there needs to be a wall of separation between Church and State. Obviously, there cannot be.

The State regulates how we build our churches and schools. The State steps in if criminal activity takes place. Our legal tradition has never recognized any right of "sanctuary" which immunizes a person from arrest. There are also benefits from the State. The State provides police and fire protection and trash removal for churches. The Church is the voice of conscience, a "community of conscience."

The Church has the numbers and strength to question official policies where Gospel values are at stake, because government policies has moral implications. Government can build up or weaken families; it can protect or destroy life; it can enhance or weaken human dignity; the government can support or burden the practice of religion.

We can also apply Jesus' words not only to the relationship of Church and State, but to our religion and our politics. Our faith should influence our politics because we Christians can bring moral vision to our nation. If we do not, someone else will bring their priorities to what the government does. When Jesus says, *"Repay to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's,"* he is speaking only about the institutions of Church and State. Jesus is also speaking about our religion and our politics. We should not separate our religion and our politics because we have obligations to Caesar, the State, and obligations to God. They are not separate watertight compartments.

Jesus says to us, *"Let Caesar be Caesar, but let God be God."* We should not confuse the two. We give Caesar our taxes, our loyalty, our judgment. But our conscience, our soul, our choices in life belong to God. In the evening of life, we will be responsible for what we have done as individuals and as citizens, not to Caesar, but to God.

Let Caesar be Caesar, but let God be God.

- Fr. Stephen Lattner, O.S.B.