

Sunday Reflection With Fr. Rafal



Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ Jesus,

On this **29th Sunday in Ordinary Time** Jesus says to give "to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God." Those were challenging words in Jesus' day, and they continue to challenge us.

In Jesus' time, government dominated religion. The Roman emperor was himself the "Pontifex Maximus" - the chief priest. In Israel the priesthood had become subservient to the state. Jesus, by way of contrast, was his own man. When they questioned him about the census tax, he did not have a coin in his pocket. He had to ask them to show him a piece of currency. Noting the image of Caesar on the coin, he said, "Then repay to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God."

Give to Caesar what belongs to him and to God what belongs to him. Yes, we must obey the just laws of our nation. At the same time we must give to God what belongs to him. And what belongs to God? Our consciences - that inner core of our being.

To some people it means dividing their lives into compartments. Here is my political life where I vote and pay taxes. Next my economic life where I earn and spend money. Then comes my social life and my family life. And if I have the time, my religious life - but I don't want to overdo it or people will think I am a fanatic. All these compartments cause us to fragment our lives. The fragmented person winds up feeling broken, divided, never knowing who he really is. That is not what Jesus intended.

When Jesus told us to give to Caesar what belongs to him and to God what belongs to him, he meant us to ask a simple question: just what is it I owe to the world and what is it I owe to God? When we frame the question that way, the answer is pretty obvious. I owe certain passing things to this world - and they are genuine duties, like paying taxes. But if I ask what I owe to God, there can be only one answer. I owe him everything. I cannot separate one corner and give it to God, then do with the rest whatever I please. Every second of my life, everything I possess, all the mental and physical energy in me has only one source. We hear it very plainly in the reading from Isaiah: "I am Lord and there is no other. There is no god besides me."

What we owe to Caesar - or to anyone else - can never be placed on equal footing with what we owe God. I have heard confession now for over 9 years. People have confessed every sin against the ten commandments - perjury, stealing, drunkenness, adultery and many others. But one sin I seldom, if ever, hear is the one against the first commandment. Yet it is probably our most common sin. "I am the Lord your God, you shall not have false gods before me." We worship a false god whenever we give a person or thing priority over God himself. I am not going to give you a check list of idols (alcohol, sex, money, etc.). What I want you to do is ask yourself, when you are alone and nothing immediate demands your attention, where do your thoughts fly? That person or thing or activity may well be your "god."

Jesus wants first place in our thoughts. Not that he has some kind of "need" for us. Just the opposite. He knows we will never be happy until we render to God what belongs to God, that is our entire being. One powerful step in doing that is giving of part of our financial resources in the collection so we as the St. Joseph Parish community can support parish events, St. Joseph school, Food Pantry, St. Vincent de Paul, Youth activities and many many other events that define who we are as Catholics and Christians - the instruments of God's love, compassion, mercy, forgiveness and kindness.

My Brothers and Sisters, render to God what belongs to God...

Fr. Rafal Ligenza

St. Joseph Parish Administrator