

29th SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME YEAR A 2020

Isaiah 45:1, 4-6 1 Thessalonians 1:1-5 Matthew 22:15-21

Reflection

Fr Tao Pham

Dear sisters and brothers, this weekend's Gospel brings us back to the challenge of living in a world that is not Christian and learning how to live with politicians and civil governors. The Pharisees and the Herodians could hardly be called allies during the time of Jesus. The Pharisees resisted foreign domination and the Herodians supported it. Both joined forces, however, to question Jesus concerning the paying of taxes to the emperor.

The Gospel gives us the account of the Herodians trying to trap Jesus by having Him be against the government. They are actually trying to trap him. If Jesus agrees to pay the tax, he will appear to support a foreign ruler. If Jesus refuses to pay the tax, the Herodians can accuse him of undermining the rule of Rome.

Instead, Jesus goes right around their arguments and simply tells them that civil government has to be obeyed insofar as it is not a Church matter. Jesus recognises their hypocrisy and asks them for a coin used to pay the taxes. Jesus, following the belief of his day that any material goods belonged to the one whose image was somehow embedded in that material, applies this way of thinking to the Roman coin. As long as Caesar's image is there, it belongs to Caesar. Jesus recognizes the trap and gives an historic and 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."

Jesus replied, "Give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar, and to God what belongs to God." (For Caesar we can substitute the State). This doesn't mean that there are some things that belong to Caesar and others that belong to God, as if reality were divisible into 'secular' and 'sacred'. It means that an obligation to Caesar stands under and is judged by a paramount obligation: to acknowledge the sovereignty of God.

The question, "Is it permissible to pay taxes to Ceasar or not?", posed to Jesus was an attempt to draw him into the world of politics. In our time politics has a bad name. Politicians are frequently caricatured and mocked. In many countries, civil

governments are beginning to make laws that will make Christians have to live against the law. In the areas of sexuality, sexual identity, marriage, abortion and euthanasia, the civil governments are moving in directions completely against the teachings of our Lord. And there is very little civil discourse about these matters. Societies are being polarized and Christians who want to be faithful are being seen as old fashioned, out of date and against others. Hence, Christians tend to opt out of public life, and leave to others dangerous, daring, and responsible things such as politics, law-making, and business. But when they do this they are leaving these important things to others who may not be motivated by Christian values and principles. We can give to Caesar what is Caesar's, but we cannot give to Caesar that which belongs to God.

As Christians we have dual citizenship. We are citizens of the country in which we happen to be living or in which we were born. To it we owe many benefits. To its forces of law and order we owe that fact that we are able to live in peace and security. To its public services we owe transport, water, light, etc. To its social provisions we have access to education, medical care, and so on.

These benefits mean we are under obligation to the State. The legitimate State has rights, and Christians will respect those rights. We must respect its laws and rulers. We must be responsible citizens, and, as far as we are able, play our part in making the country a good place for all its citizens. Failure to be a good citizen is a failure in Christian duty. To cheat the State is to cheat one's fellow citizens, and to cheat one's fellow citizens is to cheat God.

But as Christians we are also citizens of the kingdom of God. To it we owe certain privileges, and to it we also have obligations. In most cases the two responsibilities do not clash. But at times they may. And when they do, Christians will spontaneously know which come first.

When Jesus said, "Give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar", his assumption was that Caesar's claim would be just. He wasn't giving Caesar a blank cheque. If it is a case of having to choose one against the other, the Christian has only one choice. As Christians our first and deepest loyalty is to God. To God alone we render worship. In other things we gladly acknowledge and serve the secular powers, praying that they will rule wisely and justly.

Christians will strive to be good citizens of their country, and at the same time good citizens of the kingdom of God. They will fail neither in their duty to God nor

to their fellow citizens. For a believer, in a sense everything is given to God, even what is given to Caesar.

The words of Thomas More should be an inspiration to us: *“I die the king’s good servant, but God’s first”*. On the other hand, the words of Cardinal Wolsey (spoken in his death bed) should act as warning to us: *“Would that I had served my God half as well as my king.”*

Jesus does not give a detailed theory of church-state relations. How the two obligations are reconciled is not explained. Such an explanation would be useless when the audience is so insincere. Jesus recognizes that the State (Caesar) has a role, but its power is limited and does not supplant God.

Christians should not shirk public office. After all, it is an opportunity to serve their fellow men and women and thereby God. The Pharisees opted out of real life and kept themselves apart. The result was a vain religiosity that had little or nothing to do with life. It’s not easy for a Christian to be involved in politics and in business today. It means he or she is God’s servant and Caesar’s too.

A true Christian is at one and the same time a good citizen of his country and a good citizen of the kingdom of God. He will fail neither in his duty to God nor to his fellow men and women. But as Christians, our first and deepest loyalty is to God. To God alone we render worship. In other things we gladly acknowledge and serve the secular powers, praying that they will rule wisely and justly.

Dear sisters and brothers, as we know, the most important part of a ship is the rudder. Without the rudder it could not be steered. It would simply run amuck. The most precious thing we possess is our conscience. Without a conscience we could not steer the barque of our lives towards the harbour of truth and right. As Christians God must always have the first claim on our conscience.

Today you could say that Caesar’s place is taken by the secular State, which is not so much against God as without God. It no longer bases its law on God’s laws. This can pose serious dilemmas for Christians, especially those in public office. They cannot impose their own moral values and beliefs on others, yet they must not take part in what, from a Christian viewpoint, is morally wrong.

Every Christian living in the modern world is faced with difficult decisions. There are many little ‘Caesar’ vying from a piece of our conscience. There is the party, the company, the club, and so on. Franz Jeggerstatter shows us that whatever

else we might give to Ceasar, we must not give him our conscience. Conscience is the divine thing in us. So we are called today to prepare ourselves a 'sharp' conscience for conflict and for being judged badly and for being seen as old-fashioned. In fact, we might even have to suffer for our beliefs. Let us trust that God will always give us a 'sharp' conscience and the strength to be faithful to the Lord Jesus and His Church. Amen.

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