

Deacon Dan's homily for Sunday, October 18, 2020 – "Render Unto Caesar"

As election day draws nearer, some of us may still be trying to make sense of the language in the ballot propositions, candidate statements, and the not so unexpected political rhetoric arriving in our mailboxes, television, social media and along the streets.

This is part of American life at election time, during what we called the silly season when I was working in government.



It should be about candidate qualifications and choosing alternative solutions via public policy proposals to social, economic, environmental and other challenges facing our Country. Unfortunately, it also includes expressions of hatred for groups of people, name calling, attacking the person, half-truths and no truths in advertising, and a resulting division of peoples. So, this time of the year I sometimes want to just pull the covers up over my head and shun the world.

But, that is not what we are called to do as Catholic Christians, is it? No, we are called to be the salt of the earth, to be light for others, to speak truth and to love our neighbors as we love ourselves.

And, so this morning we have the story of Jesus, his detractors, the Roman coin, and one of His most famous one-liners, "...repay to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God."

This story is about the relationship between church and state. Its clear isn't it, people were wrangling about how to balance their lives between religious practice and government interference 2,000 years ago, and today we have discussions over the same thing...close churches, open churches; masks, no masks; COVID tracing sign-in, privacy, and on and on.

Pope Benedict wrote, *"...it is not the proper task of the Church to engage in the political work of bringing about the most just society possible; nonetheless she cannot and must not remain on the sidelines in the struggle for justice. The Church "has to play her part through rational argument and she has to reawaken the spiritual energy without which justice, which always demands sacrifice, cannot prevail and prosper."*

Last week I spoke to our students in the School Ministry about the living Word (capital "W") of God. How God speaks to us, collectively and individually, each time we read or hear Scripture. Today's a wonderful example!

A bit of context, what's actually happening, is helpful for us to better understand today's Gospel. First, we hear from Matthew that the Pharisees and Herodians were trying to entrap Jesus. Their intent was evil; it was self-centered and manipulative .

The Pharisees and Herodians shared no love for one another. In fact, the cliché, "the enemy of my enemy is my friend," applies to this collusion between them. They both wanted Jesus gone for their own reasons. If our Lord says yes, pay the tax, the Pharisees will indite him as an enemy of the people, a collaborator with the Romans.

If He says, no don't pay the tax, he will be arrested as a dissenter, a trouble-maker. In a clever manner they seemingly place Jesus on the horns of a dilemma. But Jesus answer is not Caesar or God, but Caesar and God.

Some interpret this passage as evidence of separation between church and state; and there is a rightly ordered separation between the two, each having its own sphere of responsibility. But, does it mean politics belongs only in the public arena and religion only belongs in the private arena?

No! Religion does not have supremacy over government and government doesn't have supremacy over religion. However, all things belong in God's sphere. God sustains all of the world. He presses on every aspect of creation. Everything in the world belongs to God.

Pope Benedict 16 wrote, *"St. Augustine used this particular Scriptural passage several times in his homilies, "If Caesar reclaims his own image impressed on the coin, will not God demand from man the divine image sculpted within him?" And further, "as the tribute money is rendered to him (Caesar), so should the soul be rendered to God, illumined and stamped with the light of his countenance."*

If we think there is a distinct separation between government and religion in these United States, just look at Judge Amy Coney Barrett judicial nomination hearings this week. So many of the questions that came to her were about her views on abortion, marriage, the sanctity of life. Falsely, our laws have inserted themselves into the place of God, of creator; wrongly determining when life will be stopped and when life will be allowed.

Do you think it is mere coincidence that a Catholic woman, a woman who is a member of the St. Joseph County Right to Life organization, a professor of law from one of the most well-known Catholic Universities in the world, a wife and mother of seven children, is the center point of our national media, the focus of our country's political leadership during Respect Life month?

I don't think its coincidence; I think it's the hand of God in His created world bringing forth a person to our highest court that will look at cases brought before her with a humility, an intelligence and a view-point that recognizes God is in everything and everyone.

As Catholics, during this election time and beyond into the coming year, what do we render unto Caesar? Well, we should be good citizens...not just good citizens, but exemplary citizens; we follow the laws and work to change unjust ones, we pay our taxes, we contribute to the good of our community, and we vote in ways that protect and uphold the values of our Church.

And, how do we give to God what is Gods? We love Him with all our hearts, with all our soul and all our minds. And love our neighbor as ourselves. We abandon ourselves to Him, to His Divine Providence. Conforming our will, our hearts, to His; asking for the desire to do so, and the gifts to do it. And, we follow the teachings of our Church. Teachings that are rooted in Divine Law, Natural Law, and 2,000 years of the wisdom of the Magisterium of our Church.

A well-formed conscience is formed well by knowing these teachings; and a well-formed conscience provides for wise decisions.

There's a beautiful painting done in the baroque style by Peter Paul Reubens around 1620 titled "Render Unto Caesar". This painting captures the scene in this Gospel passage. Jesus is on one side, the front men for the Pharisees and the Herodians are on the other side, the coin is being held low by our Lord in the middle, and the men around Jesus are focused on the coin. Jesus is pointing up toward heaven/God.

The imagery is illustrating how things of the world, things down low, capture our attention most of the time...work, hobbies, school, sports, food, you name it; things of Caesar. But, Jesus is always telling us to move up, to look to God for all we need. After all, everything that we can hold in our hand, came to us from God; and everything that we hold is intended to be given away, in some fashion.

This is Mission Sunday; a day to remember that we are missionary disciples, intended/called to take out into the world what we are given in Faith. *Benedict wrote in his Apostolic Exhortation: Sacramentum Caritatis (The Sacrament of Charity), "The love that we celebrate in the (Eucharist) sacrament is not something we can keep to ourselves. By its very nature it demands to be shared with all. What the world needs is God's love; it needs to encounter Christ and to believe in him. The Eucharist is thus the source and summit not only of the Church's life, but also of her mission: "an authentically eucharistic Church is a missionary Church." (234) We too must be able to tell our brothers and sisters with conviction: "That which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you may have fellowship with us" (1 Jn 1:3). Truly, nothing is more beautiful than to know Christ and to make him known to others."*

Twenty-ninth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Lectionary: 145

Reading 1

IS 45:1, 4-6

Thus says the LORD to his anointed, Cyrus,
whose right hand I grasp,
subduing nations before him,
and making kings run in his service,
opening doors before him
and leaving the gates unbarred:
For the sake of Jacob, my servant,
of Israel, my chosen one,
I have called you by your name,
giving you a title, though you knew me not.
I am the LORD and there is no other,
there is no God besides me.
It is I who arm you, though you know me not,
so that toward the rising and the setting of the sun
people may know that there is none besides me.
I am the LORD, there is no other.

Responsorial Psalm

PS 96:1, 3, 4-5, 7-8, 9-10

R. (7b) Give the Lord glory and honor.

Sing to the LORD a new song;
sing to the LORD, all you lands.
Tell his glory among the nations;
among all peoples, his wondrous deeds.

R. Give the Lord glory and honor.

For great is the LORD and highly to be praised;
awesome is he, beyond all gods.
For all the gods of the nations are things of nought,
but the LORD made the heavens.

R. Give the Lord glory and honor.

Give to the LORD, you families of nations,
give to the LORD glory and praise;
give to the LORD the glory due his name!
Bring gifts, and enter his courts.

R. Give the Lord glory and honor.

Worship the LORD, in holy attire;
tremble before him, all the earth;
say among the nations: The LORD is king,
he governs the peoples with equity.

R. Give the Lord glory and honor.

Reading 2

1 THES 1:1-5B

Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy to the church of the Thessalonians
in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ:
grace to you and peace.

We give thanks to God always for all of you,
remembering you in our prayers,
unceasingly calling to mind your work of faith and labor of love
and endurance in hope of our Lord Jesus Christ,
before our God and Father,
knowing, brothers and sisters loved by God,
how you were chosen.

For our gospel did not come to you in word alone,
but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with much conviction.

Alleluia

PHIL 2:15D, 16A

R. Alleluia, alleluia.

Shine like lights in the world
as you hold on to the word of life.

R. Alleluia, alleluia

Gospel

MT 22:15-21

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."