

29th Sunday in Ordinary Time-A

Today's gospel shows up every three years at this same time of the rolling year posing an important question for Our Lord and for us which gives us pause for reflection. The topic is one with which we struggle each time we enter the voting booth.

The Pharisees are trying to trap Jesus. They are trying to trap Him on the horns of a dilemma. They want to put Him in an inescapably awkward position.

They pose this question: *What is your opinion: Is it lawful to pay the census tax to Caesar or not?*

Well, it is a very clever question if they want to get Him in trouble. If He says yes it is lawful to pay the census tax to Caesar, then He becomes the enemy of the people, those who are laboring under the terrible burden of occupation and political oppression. Then He is a collaborator with the hated Romans. But, if He says no, then He is in immediate danger of arrest. He might be seen by the Romans and their allies as a dangerous revolutionary trying to stir up the people. The Pharisees are trying to undermine Him and destroy his credibility.

Now, as is His wont, Jesus deftly escapes from this trap, annunciating one of His famous one-liners: *...then repay to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God.* It's a clever line, no doubt, but it's much more than merely clever. It's more than wriggling deftly off the hook.

In some ways, this response of Jesus is a resolution in principle to one of the greatest problems we face: namely, the relationship between Church and State—the relationship between politics and religion. Just as this is a complex and divisive question now, it was a complex and divisive question then.

So let's take this line of the Lord and use it to shed light on this question, in an attempt to resolve this issue. First of all, how shouldn't we read this one-liner of Jesus? We should **not** read it as a simplistic splitting up of available funds between God and Caesar. As if there exists a clearly demarcated political realm that belongs to the Caesars of the world and a clearly demarcated spiritual realm that belongs to God. We also should **not** read it in the modern mode: namely, that the public arena belongs to politics while religion is relegated to the private dimension. We recognize this as the so-called *modern peace treaty* i.e.: we will tolerate religion as long as it remains private.

But this is not how we should construe this line of Jesus. This understanding will not do, because God is God. He is not a being in the world; not one thing among many; not so much the Supreme Being hovering above the beings of the world. Rather, in our great theology, God is the sheer act of being itself. God is that creative power which is here and now sustaining the whole of the universe. This means that even as God transcends the whole world, God pervades the whole world. God touches on everything in existence. God presses on every aspect of creation.

So we cannot say this or that is a realm that does not belong to God. Here's a realm that simply belongs to Caesar. No, everything in the world belongs to God because He is the creator of it.

Let me offer some other examples of what I mean. Does law belong to God? Yes! What seizes the lawyer, the lawyer working at his best? It is a deep passion for justice. This is what informs everything a lawyer does at his best. What is justice but God, who is justice itself?

What seizes the artist at her best—a deep passion for beauty. This animates all that the artist does. What is beauty but God; God is the beautiful itself.

What seizes the doctor, the nurse, the medical technician at their best? It is a deep passion for alleviating suffering. Who is God, but love itself seeking to alleviate our suffering.

God grounds and pervades and animates and inspires and draws all aspects of reality at their best and purest. Everything comes from God and everything returns to God. This is why in the Book of Revelation, in that beautiful vision of the Heavenly Jerusalem, we hear that there is no temple; because in the Heavenly Jerusalem, where everything is properly ordered, the city itself has become a temple. Everything in the city from the law courts to the sports arenas to the banks, everything in the city is related to God, is grounded in God, is itself the temple.

So now, what about the question of religion and politics? This same principle has to apply: politics is not a realm absolutely separate from the religious. Rather its deepest ground and purpose is spiritual.

In St. Thomas Aquinas' Summa you will find a treatise on law and the nature of law. He says: the prime law is the eternal law, which is the same as the mind of God. The eternal law is the divine order by which all the universe is governed. There is a reflection of the eternal law; Thomas calls it the natural law. It abides in you and me; it abides in our minds and hearts. We know its principles by a kind of immediate intuition. The natural law grounds morality. All of our moral intuitions come from the natural law. The natural law participates in the eternal law, comes from it and reflects it.

Now a third aspect, in Thomas' doctrine of law, is positive law. This means human law: everything from traffic regulations to antitrust legislation to the last bit of legislation being debated by the congress. All this positive law is, in turn, meant to be a reflection of the natural law. The purpose of the law is to make us good according to Catholic theology. The purpose of the law is to reflect the moral imperative of the natural law which in turn is grounded in the eternal law of the Divine Mind.

What's my point here? All law, the very stuff of politics, has to do with God; because positive law nests in the natural law which nests in the Eternal Law of God. This is why

we are obliged to resist unjust laws. Unjust laws are not just a political problem. They are a moral problem and a spiritual problem.

The question then arises: do we then go to the other extreme and say that religion swallows everything up? Should priests be supervising everything: supervising the work of artists, poets, physicians, politicians, and lawyers? No, of course not! Each of these realms has their own legitimate rules, laws, disciplines, regulations, and practices. And I as a priest know nothing of these and therefore should render to them the things that are legitimately theirs.

Even though this question is a complicated one, I think we can use this dictum of the Lord to help us shed light on both sides of it. If we do not render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's then religion becomes overbearing. Then it is as though the spiritual swallows up the secular. We are violating one side of the doctrine of creation which lets things be. On the other hand, if we don't emphasize the intimate connection between God and all things, then we undermine what they are supposed to be according to God's will.

To sum up: render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's in his own legitimate realm. And render to God the things that are God's—including Caesar. Even as we render to Caesar what is legitimately his, we acknowledge as people of faith that Caesar, politics, and law all belong to God. Let the Lord's saying sink into your heart as we wrestle with this difficult issue.

- Fr. David M. Chiantella