

Archbishop Lori's Homily: 29th Sunday in Ordinary Time; Knights of Columbus Board Meeting

29th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Knights of Columbus Board Meeting

Phoenix, Arizona

October 22, 2017

A deeply Catholic organization with patriotism as one of its principles would have a special interest in today's Gospel passage, where Jesus says, "...repay to Caesar what belongs to Caesar, and to God what belongs to God." So, is it possible to love and serve both God and country? What can we possibly give to our government that does not already belong to God? Let's try to answer to this question by taking a second look at this Gospel reading.

Well, it's never a surprise, is it, to find the Pharisees trying to trap Jesus? Sometimes, I think, the Pharisees are like the cartoon character, Wile E. Coyote... but I will not complete that thought in reference to our Savior! The point is that they never could catch him because the Pharisees took the low road and Jesus took the high road. The Pharisees used their ingenuity and energy to trap Jesus so that, in the name of religion, they might retain their power. Jesus, on the other hand, came to do the will of the Father. His were the words of the Father who sent him. His will conformed to the saving will of the Father. Thus Jesus lived on a plane entirely different from those who used religion for their own purposes.

Now, the Pharisees thought they had Jesus between a rock and a hard place when

they asked if it was lawful to pay the census tax to the Roman Emperor. Had Jesus said, “Yes, of course, you’ve got to pay that census tax” –he would have been seen as siding with the Roman oppressors and many people would have turned against him. On the other hand, if Jesus had said, “No, don’t pay that tax, it’s unlawful,” then the Pharisees would have denounced Jesus to the authorities as a rebel, and there was a high likelihood he’d be prosecuted.

Travelling the high road, Jesus transcended the trap the Pharisees set for him, and he did this by calling their attention and ours to images and inscriptions: *the image on a Roman coin and the image engraved within ourselves*. So, Jesus asked the Pharisees to hand him a coin used to pay the census tax and further asked whose image was engraved on it. They answered, “Caesar’s” – Tiberius Caesar (14-37 AD) to be exact. The inscription on one side referred to Caesar as “the divine son of Augustus” and the inscription on the other side declared Caesar to be a “high priest”. Talk about government overreach! And it’s hard, isn’t it, to conjure up imagery more offensive to Jewish sensibilities. Jesus surely appreciated the irony of the situation but did not comment directly. Instead, he gave the Pharisees an *enigmatic* answer to their *malevolent* question: “... repay to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God.”

Well, somewhere in those few words (without advocating for or against civil disobedience) Jesus managed to demystify, to desacralize, the Emperor: he made clear that Caesar is not God. So far so good, but we haven’t yet answered the question posed at the outset: “What could we give to Caesar that does not already belong to God?”

Maybe we’ll come closer if we ask another question, and it’s this: Whose image is engraved in the depth of *our* being? On one side of the coin, do we not find the image of the God who made us, with the inscription “*veritas*” or “truth”? On the other side of the coin, do we not find a likeness to Christ our Redeemer, with the

inscription “*caritas*” or “charity”? This latter image was engraved upon our souls on the day of our baptism when we received an *indelible sacramental character*. True enough, the divine image in us may be tarnished but it has not disappeared because, to repeat, it has been indelibly engraved in the depth of our hearts. St. Paul says as much in today’s reading from 1st Thessalonians: “For our gospel did not come to you in word alone but also in power and in the Holy Spirit...”

Now, if the coin with Caesar’s image was used to pay the census tax, that is, a tax for being accounted a part of the Roman Empire, the sacramental character imprinted in us by baptism makes us part of God’s holy people purchased at the price of the Savior’s blood. Even more wonderfully, this character claims us personally for the Triune God. As adopted sons and daughters, all we are and all we have belong to God. And belonging to God obligates us to one thing, namely, to renounce idols, and, like Jesus, the Father’s beloved Son, to do the will of the Father. To seek God’s will in spite of our sinfulness; to seek it with humility and meekness; *to abandon ourselves to God’s grace so that we can abandon ourselves to his will*. When we do this, we will live, not on the level of the Pharisees, not on the level of self-promoting power or tricky argumentation. Rather, we will find ourselves living amid the interplay of the self-giving love shared between the Father and the Son. Living at that level gives us a wisdom and peace the world cannot give.

So, let’s revisit our question one last time. If everything, including our very lives, belongs to God, what’s left for Caesar? Do we grudgingly pay our taxes, vote periodically for the lesser of two evils, and separate plastic from paper when taking out the trash? Or might there be something more we can contribute to government and society?

May I submit that when our inner coin bearing the stamp of God shines brightly, when we seek the will of a truly provident creator who acts mysteriously within the

ebb and flow of history, then we are repaying Caesar superabundantly. For in becoming good citizens of the City of God we will become also good citizens of the earthly city... not necessarily the citizens it *wants* but the citizens it *needs*, and needs desperately. How we live this out varies in each of our lives. Some may be called take on major responsibilities in government and civil society. May they wisely discern the ways to reflect the faith such that it can be heard! Others may be called to lay down their lives for their country, not for vainglory, but in praise of the freedoms given us by the hand of God. And most of us make our contribution by struggling to be virtuous people, by striving to create strong families, by doing our work as well as we can, by influencing others through our example, by humbly transforming that bit of reality that is within our reach.

Thus, if we give to God what belongs to God, we will have given to Caesar what is his. Caesar, who would have nothing at all, were it not granted him from above (cf. Jn. 19:11). May God bless us and keep us always in his love!