

FR. JOHN'S HOMILY

Twenty-Ninth Sunday in Ordinary Time, October 18, 2020

Being a Catholic-Christian in our day and age is tough. It seems like our culture is becoming more and more secular every day, and we are constantly being told that we need to check our faith at the door when we enter into any public atmosphere. We hear this a lot in the lives of many public figures.

In support of this secularization, people often quote Jesus' teaching to "repay to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God." And all this seems to justify a separation of church and state. On this interpretation, it would seem then that, Jesus is saying that some things pertain to God while other things pertain to secular society, so we should limit our faith to our private lives and act just like everyone else in public.

However, that is not what Jesus is saying. We must remember that in Jesus' time there was no separation of church and state. There was no such thing as a secular society. Every society in the ancient Roman Empire was religious, and those religions were inextricably tied up with the lives of its people.

To properly understand this teaching, we have to read it in context. It comes from a story in which the Pharisees try to trick Jesus by asking Him if it is right to pay taxes to the Roman emperor. If He says yes, they can accuse Him of supporting the Roman oppression of the Jewish people. But if He says no, they can accuse Him of treason against the emperor. To sidestep this dilemma, Jesus points out that the Roman coins used to pay taxes are engraved with an *image of the emperor*, and He utters the famous line, "Then repay to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God."

Jesus is answering a question about paying taxes, and it is clear that Roman coins belong to Caesar because they bear his image. Consequently, with this first half of the saying, Jesus is telling His audience that they should pay the taxes the government requires of them because it's part of our civic duty.

The second half, "*and to God what belongs to God*," this is the challenging part for us. The context makes it clear that taxes belong to the government, but Jesus doesn't tell us what belongs to God. We have to figure that out for ourselves. What belongs to God? Would this be everything else? And what does have God's image on it? If "what belongs to Caesar" refers to things that bear Caesar's image, it stands to reason that "what belongs to God" refers to things that bear God's image. And what would those things be? We can find the answer to this question in the Old Testament:

In Genesis, chapter 1, we read, "Then God said: Let us make human beings in our image, after our likeness. Let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, the birds of the air, the tame animals, all the wild animals, and all the creatures that crawl on the earth. God created mankind in His image; in the image of God He created them; male and female He created them."

We are made in God's image. Just like ancient Roman coins bore the image of the emperor, so too does every human being bear the image of God. As a result, when Jesus tells us to give "to God what belongs to God," He is telling us to give our whole selves over to God because we bear his image. He is telling us to give God everything we are, everything we have, and everything we do.

This begins at our Baptism. Each time I have a Baptism, part of the ritual is to claim the child with the sign of the cross on the forehead. This means we are claimed by God. My life and your life belongs to God.

Once we understand this, we can see that Jesus isn't promoting a separation of church and state at all. No, He is saying that while we have legitimate obligations to the government, we have more important obligations to God. The money used throughout the Roman Empire may have belonged to Caesar, but we belong to God.

This means that our faith and our commitment to God have to play an integral role in everything we do. There is no such thing as a secular space where God has no place. His place is everywhere, not just in church for one hour a week, so we cannot check our religious beliefs at the door when we enter into the public. All of us no matter our profession or careers are challenged to live our faith, especially when our faith comes up against the values of our society that contradict our beliefs. It stands to reason that when you dedicate your life to God, your life will contradict the values of our world. Jesus found his life challenging the world around him, so we as His followers must expect the same or similar treatment from the world around us. Simply put, we belong entirely to God, and everything we do should reflect that no matter where it is or who it involves.

Yes, it is challenging to give to God what belongs to God. What belongs to God? We belong to God, whole and entire. That is why, when Jesus was asked, "What is the greatest commandment?" He answered, "The first is this: Hear O Israel, the Lord our God is Lord alone! You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind and with all your strength" (Mk 12:29).

He is not talking about ten percent or fifty percent. He said "**all**", which means one hundred percent! So, what is due to God? Everything. Since everything comes from Him, we ought to give everything back to Him. So, we ask ourselves: "Am I ready and willing to give God everything?"

I read this amusing story: An elderly man named Jack, hit the lottery and won millions of dollars. His family could not break the great news to him for fear that he might have heart attack. They requested the parish priest to do the task. Since Jack and the parish priest were very close. The priest obliged and talked to his friend Jack. After a nice visit, the Priest said to Jack, "Jack, if your lottery ticket won millions of dollars, what will you do?" Without hesitation Jack said, "I will give half of it to the church, and the other half I would give to you." The priest had heart attack.

In this amusing story, it does reveal the generosity of the man, also reflecting the generosity that God always shows us. Yes, God is generous. He gives us everything, even His only Son: "For God so loved the world that He gave His only Son." How generous are we to God? "Give to God what belongs to God." Everything!

This Saturday was the feast day of St. Ignatius of Antioch, early Bishop and Martyr of the Church, who teaches us what it means to give oneself to God. He wrote seven letters to the early church as he was being led to persecution, suffering and death. In his letters, he states: My desire is to belong to God. My love for His life has been crucified, and there is no yearning in me for any earthly things. This is a life that understood "give to God what belongs to God".