

TWENTY-NINTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME, A
OUR DUAL CITIZENSHIP

*“Give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and God what belongs to God”
(Matt. 22: 21)*

On this Twenty-ninth Sunday in Ordinary Time, Cycle A, we still accompany Jesus in the temple as He encountered the chief priests of the people, the teachers of the Law, the elders of the people, the scribes and the Pharisees. On this journey, we heard Jesus speak to these socio-religious elites of His people in three significant and symbolic parables: in the Parable of the Two Sons (Matt. 21: 28-32), they appeared under the guise of the second Son who said “yes” to the father but did not do his will; in the Parable of Wicked Tenants (Matt. 21: 33-46), they were the wicked tenants, who decidedly refused to render their accounts to the master but maltreated his servants and killed his son; in the Parable of the Wedding Feasts (Matt. 22: 1-14), they were the guests, who would not respond to the wedding invitation.

In today’s Gospel (Matt. 22: 15-21), they gang up in an unusual alliance to attack, discredit, disconcert and humiliate Jesus before the people. St. Matthew narrates that “they sent their disciples to Him, together with the Herodians.” The fact of the Pharisees and the Herodians “working” together is a very “unusual alliance.” These two groups never saw eye-to-eye. But here they are! Whereas the Pharisees, the scribes and chief priests were hard-line Jewish adherents, who saw the Romans as an unjust imposition and a sign of the departure of the “glory of the Lord” from among His people; the Herodians were Roman sympathisers, who would willingly serve the Romans and help execute their unfair rule against Jewish people. On this occasion, these unfamiliar bedfellows formed an unholy synergy to trap “The Son of Man.”

Beware of Flatteries: They came to Jesus with deceptive sweet-coated praises and false recognition, calling Him “Master”, acknowledging Him as “an honest Man”, who “teach the way of God in an honest way” with distinguished fearlessness. And they put this question to Him: “Is it permissible to pay taxes to Caesar or not?” The purpose of these flatteries was to trap Jesus by luring Him with their surreptitious and hypocritical brain-washing. Jesus was well-aware of this. As the good old saying goes: “Beware of the Greeks, even when they come offering gifts”, we too need to learn a lesson from this encounter – never let yourself be carried away by human praises, for in most cases, they come with twisted and inhuman consequences to satisfy their vile desires.

But Jesus Knew their Minds: The evangelist explains Jesus' response as following from His divine ability to discern human minds and hearts: "But Jesus was aware of their malice. And said to them: 'You hypocrites! Why do you set this trap for Me?'" Jesus knew their minds: we cannot hide it from God. Jesus knows us through and through. As the Psalmist says: "O Lord, You know me, You discern my purpose from afar ... Before a word is formed in my mouth, you know it entirely, O Lord" (Ps. 139: 1, 2, 4). Sometimes, we are tempted to think that God does not know this or that; what man can never comprehend, God knows in its entirety. He sees the hearts and minds of men (1 Sam. 16: 7).

The Unexpected Answer: Jesus then asked for the money with which they paid the tax. The tax here was neither the ground tax nor income tax: it was the poll tax, which every male person from the age of fourteen to the sixty-five, and by every female from the age of twelve to sixty-five. It was very punitive and unjust taxation. A constant reminder of their political subjugation and enslavement under the Romans. They then handed Jesus a denarius, on it was inscribed the head of Caesar. By producing the coin, Jesus exposed the hypocrisy of the Pharisees, for though they opposed payments of taxes to the foreign government, they were in the habit of paying it themselves like every other Jew of the time. Is it not true that sometimes, the very people who persuade us not to obey certain laws turn around to act obediently? Sometimes, it is good for us to act in accord with the dictates of our consciences instead of allowing ourselves to be misguided and deceived. Jesus took the coin, looked at it, and perhaps smiled ruefully and painfully at the ignorance and wickedness of His people. He looked up at them and asked: "Whose head is this? Whose name?" They responded "Caesar's." Then He said: "Very well, give back to Caesar what belongs to Caesar – and God what belongs to God." This was the smartest, most unexpected answer the Jews envisaged. Their complex question was a carefully set trap which could have convicted Jesus either way. For if He had said: "Yes, it is permissible for you to pay taxes to Caesar", He would have made Himself unpopular among His people because that would tantamount to support of the Roman imperialists. On the other hand, if He had said: "No, it is not permissible to pay taxes to Caesar", He would have seen by the Romans to be inciting a public mutiny against their government. By responding thus, His position was clear: "Be obedient citizens and true Jews."

We are Dual Citizens: This answer is timeless. Oh, how its relevance still resonates in our lived experiences to this day. By this answer Jesus was not making any rules instead, He has opened for us the right perspective to view the reality of our lives. Every Christian is a dual citizen – a citizen of heaven and citizen of the world, of our

country. We owe responsibilities and obedience to both. Obedience to God, and carrying out our civic responsibilities are not opposed to each other. A good Christian must be a good citizen. They are two sides of the same coin. The Word of God exhorts us to live in obedience to civil authority, to pray for and honour those in authority (1 Tim. 2: 1-2; 1 Pet. 2: 17; Rom. 13: 1).

My dear friends, when Jesus instructed the Jews to give to Caesar what is Caesar's, He did so because the coin had the image of Caesar inscribed on it. What is this saying to us? St Augustine wrote: "As human beings, we are Christ's currency. That is where Christ's image is, Christ's name. Christ's style and titles." Tertullian also wrote that "The image of Caesar on the coin is Caesar's, and the image of God in man is God's. Thus, we render our money to Caesar and ourselves to God. Otherwise, what would be God's if everything is Caesar's." Since we are Christ's currency, created, inscribed and stamped in the image of God, it follows necessarily that we should give ourselves to God, for we belong to Him. This is the challenge that this message of Christ poses to us personally. May the Lord give us the grace to give ourselves wholly to Him, for to Him we belong, in Him we live and have our being.