

29th Sunday Ordinary Time Year A

October 17-18, 2020

Is it lawful to pay the census tax to Caesar or not?

Readings: Isaiah 45:1, 4-6; 1 Thessalonians 1:1-5; Matthew 22:15-21

It is nearly impossible to turn on a television these days without seeing a journalist trying out his or her best “Gotcha” question to any number of candidates running for public office at all levels of government. Everyone wants to be on the one to confront power with truth. Well, today we see some evidence of a “Gotcha” question in the Scriptures.

For the observant Jew, paying a tax to an entity that minted coins of someone purportedly thought to be divine was an affront to God. Caesar was not king– only God was king. But notice the prepositional phrase here, cleverly snuck in. “They sent their disciples to him, with the Herodians...” You see, the Herodians thought differently. They would favor payment of the tax; the Pharisees did not.

Typically, the Herodians wanted nothing to do with the Pharisees. And yet in this case, the old adage fits–“the enemy of an enemy is a friend.” The Herodians saw Jesus as a threat– they wanted to be rid of this distraction. They too wanted to discredit Jesus. How better than to trap him with a “gotcha” question. “Is it lawful to pay the tax or not?” If Jesus were to say “Yes,” he incurs the anger of the Jewish population. If he says “No,” the Herodians turn him over to the authorities for the offense of treason. Looks like a real “win-win” for his enemies.

So, our Lord turns the tables by asking **both sides** to produce the coin. This tax could only be paid in Roman coinage. Since both questioners apparently had one, presumably they were prepared to pay the tax. Jesus avoided their trap by saying, “Then repay to Caesar what belongs to Caesar,” while then coyly adding “and to God what belongs to God.” Thus, all earthly leaders must acknowledge this, namely God’s authority over them. Even political power derives from God, and as such ought to be used for the benefit of the common good.

I linked a document on the Cathedral website that I encourage you to read because it gives a fuller treatment of how we as Catholics bring to bear the principles of our faith in the public square. Approved by the USCCB, it highlights some key principles. I will briefly mention three:

1. Catholics ought to exercise their right and duty to vote
2. The Church does not tell you for whom to vote, or what party
3. The Church does have a place at the table, a space in the public square to weigh in on moral issues that have serious repercussions, both on individuals and society at large.

From the outset, our shepherds are clear that “... we bring the richness of our faith to the public square.” This is good– we are to use both faith and reason “as we seek to affirm the dignity of the human person and the common good of all.”¹ The document is quite clear at the outset: “The threat of abortion remains our preeminent priority because it directly attacks life itself, because it takes place within the sanctuary of the family, and because of the number of lives destroyed.”

It continues, “At the same time, we cannot dismiss or ignore other serious threats to human life and dignity such as racism, the environmental crisis, poverty and the death penalty.”² Today’s second reading reminded us: “For our gospel did not come to you in word alone, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with much conviction.” If the Gospel remains at the level of words alone, one could legitimately ask “Why even bother?”

Words without actions are meaningless, faith without works is dead, as is stated in the Letter of James. We desire to imbue society with the Good News of Jesus Christ, not simply to gain spiritual nourishment, safely within these four walls. Our Gospel is more than words– it is God’s Word put into practice– that is where the rubber meets the road. And this includes civic duty. Thus, Jesus speaks of dual duties, but not split loyalties. We have duties both towards God and our community.

¹ *Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship*, Introductory Letter, USCCB November 2019

² *Ibid.*

We are loyal to the Truth, and we have every right and duty as integral human persons to bring the light of this Truth into the workplace, the voting booth and our communities, always respectful of others, but never pretending that our convictions are somehow separate from who we are. These are not new questions. It is essential for us to realize that our faith informs the very manner in which we act and make judgments.

As Catholics, we have a broad vision, encompassing the whole world. This is to be truly Catholic. We are Catholic; we are American. There is no contradiction between the two. We pay taxes and we have a voice, and that voice will be heard. With the convictions about which Saint Paul wrote in his letter to the Thessalonians, we can surely have confidence in rendering to Caesar what is Caesar's, but even more so in rendering to God what is properly God's.