



Homily – 29th Sunday in Ordinary Time (A)ⁱ

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*Cathedral of Our Lady of the Angeles
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My dear brothers and sisters in Christ:

These words of Jesus Christ that we have just heard in our Gospel are very well known, even among non-Christians: *Repay to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God!*

This is, as we know, an important passage of the Gospel for all of us, because it teaches us about our duty to participate in the public life of our nation as faithful citizens, according to God's will and God's plan for the human person.

It is an interesting passage of the Gospel. We can see how the Pharisees and the Herodians are trying to trap Jesus. And they come up with a very clever question — about taxes.

It is clever because if Jesus says, "Yes, people should pay taxes to Caesar," then he will alienate his Jewish followers who do not like Caesar or Rome's occupation of Israel. But if Jesus says, "No, they should not pay taxes to Caesar," then he will be labeled as an enemy of the Roman government.

It is interesting to see how the whole thing develops and how Jesus notices they are doing it to trap him. The Gospel says they were acting with malice.

When we think about it, obviously Jesus' answer is the perfect answer — because he is "perfect God and perfect man." But I think when we understand the background — why they were asking this question because they wanted to trap him — this makes Jesus' answer even more powerful. We can give Caesar what is his, but we must always give God what is his!

We can see how important it is to understand our participation in the life of society and base everything on the fact that we are children of God.

The readings of today's Mass, the first and second readings, are trying to help us to understand the deeper meaning of Jesus' words for our own lives.

In our first reading, the prophet Isaiah is talking about King Cyrus the Great. He was the founder of the Persian Empire, who lived about six centuries before Christ.

Now Cyrus was a pagan — a foreign ruler who did not know the true and living God. But God still uses Cyrus to fulfill his purposes in the world and in history.ⁱⁱ And that's the prophet Isaiah's point.

We know from history that God used Cyrus to liberate his people from the exile in Babylon. Cyrus at some point issued a famous decree that allowed the Jewish people to return to their homeland to rebuild their Temple in Jerusalem.ⁱⁱⁱ

So we can see how, in a very challenging situation for the Jewish people, the chosen people, God uses even somebody who is a pagan, who has no understanding of the Jewish faith to help the Jewish people to go back to Jerusalem and rebuild the Temple.

Then in the second reading, St. Paul is telling the Thessalonians that they are loved and chosen by God. He gives thanks to God for their work of faith, their labor of love, and their endurance in hope of our Lord Jesus Christ.

St. Paul was very happy with the Thessalonians because they were trying to live as they believed. They were consistent, they were faithful to God's call to be his sons and daughters.

So the lesson for us today, as we reflect on these readings, and especially the passage of the Gospel, is that our God is the Lord of history and the Lord of all the families of nations.

My brothers and sisters, we can never forget that our God is always working for good in all things with those who love him. He can even work through historical events and political authorities to accomplish his will for our lives and for history.^{iv}

God is always concerned about us. He is always aware of what is happening in our lives — personally and in our society. Nowadays, we see in our society a lot of challenges. Just listen to the news or read the newspaper, we see all the different challenges that we have in politics and in the economy, in relationships in society — violence, war and on and on.

We cannot forget, as I just said, that God is always working for good in all things with those who love him.

This is what Jesus is really saying today, when he says: *Repay to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God!*

But the challenge that we have, or the biggest temptation probably that we have in our society, in our lives nowadays, is that our culture is trying to say that this distinction that Jesus makes — between what we owe to Caesar and what we owe to God — means that our religion should be something private, something we keep to ourselves.

And we ourselves sometimes have the temptation of thinking that there is no relationship between our faith and our daily human realities. We have the temptation of thinking that we have to go to Mass on Sunday and we can forget about God the rest of our week.

But Jesus, in today's passage of the Gospel, is telling us just the opposite. Jesus does not want us to separate our faith from our life.

I think the most beautiful way of understanding that is by thinking about the coin that Jesus asks for in the passage of the Gospel today.

The coin that is shown to him bears the image of Caesar. So *Give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar*. But at the same time Jesus says, *Give to God what belongs to God*. He is telling us that we were created in the image and likeness of God. That each one of us is made in God's image and likeness.

So we must be a reflection of God's presence in the world. In a sense, we can say that each one of us is a coin that bears the image of God. Think about it! Because I think it is important for us to understand well what Jesus means when is talking about, giving to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God.

What is more important — the fact that we are created in the image and likeness of God or the fact that we have to give material things to other people? Both are important. But it is clear to us that what is more important is to give to God what belongs to God.

There is no doubt that in today's passage of the Gospel Jesus recognizes the obligations we have as citizens of our country. But my brothers and sisters, we have to carry out those obligations always in light of our duty to God and the fact that we are children of God, created in his image and likeness.

So in everything we do, privately and in public life, we must always keep in mind that we are sons and daughters of God, that we belong to his family.

And our participation in public life is very, very important because we are bringing to the people of our time, the good news of the great dignity of the human person, created in the image of God.

So we give our country our best as citizens especially when we are trying to be totally faithful to the teachings of Christ and his Church.

So I think it is wonderful that this week, especially when we see everything that is going on around us, we can reflect on the importance of being good examples. Of showing people that — as weak as we are, sinners that we are — we are trying to be faithful citizens of God’s Kingdom and our society.

Let’s try to work harder to know what we believe as Catholics and why. What it means to be created in the image and likeness of God.

And let’s try to do more to show our neighbors how the teachings of Christ and his Church contain solid answers to the issues we face in our society.

And let’s ask our Mary, Blessed Mother, our Lady of the Angels, to help us so that we can be faithful citizens and followers of her Son. Let us ask for the courage to help shape our society so that more and more it reflects God’s law and the Gospel values of truth and love; freedom, justice and peace. Then we can follow Jesus’ advice: *Give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God.*

ⁱ Readings: Isa. 45:1, 4–6; Ps. 145:1, 3–5, 7–10; 1 Thess. 1:1–5; Matt. 22:15–26.

ⁱⁱ See Isa. 44:28.

ⁱⁱⁱ 2 Chron. 36:22–23; Ezra 1:1–4.

^{iv} Rom. 8:28.