

Twenty-ninth Sunday in Ordinary Time: Render to Caesar...and to God

“Render to Caesar what is Caesar’s and to God what is God’s.” Jesus used this saying to turn the table on the Herodians and Pharisees who were playing the “gotcha” game. That’s when someone asks a question that would back another person into a corner no matter what he answered. The thing is that Jesus was a lot smarter than they were. He was not going to let the Herodians declare that he was an enemy to Caesar by refusing to pay taxes, nor was he going to let the Pharisees declare that he was an enemy to the Hebrew people by paying taxes.

But the phrase “Render to Caesar what is Caesar’s and to God what is God’s,” has deeper implications, particularly to us here in the United States.

First of all, “render to Caesar what is Caesar’s.” We have a responsibility to be good citizens of our country. That means participating in protecting our country from those who would destroy it by joining the military and by supporting those in the military. We do not need another 9/11 to remind us that there are people in the world who are searching for ways to destroy us. What the members of the military do is protect our country even if this means sacrificing their lives for our country. We have a debt to all who serve or have served.

Second, we have a responsibility to take an active role in our government from town hall to Washington, DC. Alexis de Toquville was a Frenchman who toured our country in the 1820's and 30's. He was pleasantly surprised at how the average American citizen values speaking up at meetings and working together with others for the good of the town, city, state or federal government. This was not something he experienced anywhere in Europe. If we, as Catholics, want the laws of our country to be based on principals of Catholic morality and social justice, we have to take part in the government, not be bystanders. Yes, we need to vote, but more than vote, we need to be actively engaged in the working of our government. This is how we can lead our country to develop and expand our democracy. Of course, the least we can do is vote, not just in presidential elections but in every election. Our Catholic voice needs to be heard.

Finally, we need to support our government by each of us paying our fair share in taxes. No one likes taxes, but all of us want to know that our country is going to protect us and, when we are sick and or elderly, care for us. We need to pay our soldiers and sailors and fund our department of defense. We need to be sure that our towns, cities, counties and states have the resources they need to govern us correctly. We need to pay our first responders, police and fire, and all who work in our school system, water department, motor vehicle system, etc. etc. All of us who pay taxes, from local to federal, are invested in our government, and are proud of our government.

Those are just some points flowing from “Render to Caesar what is Caesar’s.” Infinitely more important is the second dictate of the Lord, “Render to God what is

God's." Our citizenship is in heaven, St. Paul reminds us in *Phillipians 3:20*. The main goal of each of our lives must be to spread the Kingdom of God. We must spread the Good News, the Gospel, that Jesus Christ has reunited us to our Heavenly Father. When we live his life in our own lives, he gives beauty and purpose and meaning to our lives.

Both the old Baltimore catechism and the new Catechism of the Catholic Church put this succinctly. *God made me to know Him, to love Him, and to serve Him in this world, and to be happy with Him for ever in the next.* That truth has not faded with time.

To Know Him. The New Catechism of the Catholic Church expands on this. It says, "The world was made for the glory of God. Creation testifies to that glory. Man is the pinnacle of God's creation. In coming to know Him through His creation and through Revelation, we can better testify to His glory. His perfection is made manifest "through the benefits which he bestows on creatures." And man, collectively and individually, is chief among those creatures. To put this simply, we look at all of creation and say, "How great is our God." We look at ourselves and at other people and say, "How wonderful is our God." To know God is to experience Him in the trillions and trillions of ways that creatures reflect His Presence. This is why some of the greatest scientists are people of profound faith. The more they learn about creation the greater they respect the Creator.

To love Him. God made me, and you, and every man or woman who has ever lived or ever will live, to love Him. The word *love* has sadly lost much of its deepest meaning today when we use it as a synonym for like or, perhaps, don't hate. I might say that I love spaghetti and I love chocolate cake, but I really don't love them. I like them. I love you because I can see God's presence in you. Even if we struggle to understand what love really means, God understands it perfectly. Not only is He perfect love; but His perfect love lies at the very heart of the Trinity. When we say that God made us to love Him, we mean that He made us to share in the love that the Three Persons of the Holy Trinity have for one another. Love enriches us. That is why St. Teresa of Calcutta, Mother Teresa, said that some of the most affluent people in the world are also the poorest people. They have everything except love. The beauties of material creation are meant to lead us closer to God, not away from Him. St. Augustine realized this. Before He turned to God, he let the very things that God had created stand in the way of God's Presence. We were not created for the material world. We were created for love.

To serve Him. God is greater than us. He created us and sustains us in being. In serving Him, we serve ourselves as well, in the sense that each of us becomes that unique person that God wishes us to be. We are meant to live for God. That is service.

And to be Happy with Him forever. When God made me and you and everyone else, He intended for us to be drawn into the very life of the Trinity and to enjoy eternal happiness. But He gave us the freedom to make that choice. This is what love is. Love is a choice. We choose to be with Him forever. We choose to reject all that is not Him. We fight against sin. Our reward is union with God. We can have a glimpse of this

union in our life while we are in the physical world. There are times, sometimes just fleeting moments, when we feel completely at peace with ourselves and with God. How wonderful life will be when we are completely united to God. That is heaven.

Render unto God what is God's. What is God's? "The world is the Lord's and its fullness thereof," we hear in *Psalms 24*. Other people are the Lord's. We are the Lord's. He has given Himself to us so that we can live for Him. We belong to Him. When we care for others, particularly those who reach out to us in their need, we care for his Presence within them. "As often as you do this for the least of my people, you do it for me," we all know so well from *Matthew 25*.

So can an American be a good Catholic? Can a good Catholic be an American? Of course, on both counts. A good Catholic cares for his country because he loves God and wants his country to continue to reflect the love of God in every aspect of national life. By serving his country properly, as a committed Catholic, he will be serving God.

Our prayer today is for God to help us render unto Caesar what is Caesar's and unto God what is God's.