

God's Tribute Money

Homily for October 21st and 22nd 2023
29th Sunday of Ordinary Time

Today we will be thinking about the meaning of Jesus words:

give to Caesar what is rightfully his and to God what is his.

It has often been the case, Caesar thinks everything is rightfully his. This was so in the time of Jesus, where Roman taxation was extreme and punitive. In the 20th century we saw repeated instances of the state overstepping its rightful authority and people of faith countering this violation often under great duress, and at times with martyrdom.

Think of the Krakow suburb, "Nowa Huta". It was a Soviet symbol of communist utopia. Built in 1948 by order of Joseph Stalin, he wanted to put the city's Catholic leadership on notice. Nowa Huta was to be a city without God. Years of strife followed before the communists granted permission to build a church in 1966.

An oversize cross was placed on a green space. Outdoor services were held. But no building project materialized. The government proved itself highly competent in the arts of bureaucratizing, stalling and lying as Bishop (and then Archbishop) Wojtyla patiently filed and re-filed building permits.

Violence erupted when the state came to bulldoze the cross that had stood so long in the open field. To defuse the danger without giving up the fight, Archbishop Wojtyla organized peaceful processions through the streets. He held prayer services in the fields, come rain, snow or sunshine. He even had a midnight Mass there in 1971.

At last the government relented. Officials issued a building permit — with caveats. The church had to be built without use of state property. And, of course, everything belonged to the state. There would be no steel, no concrete, no tools and no equipment. Just a patch of land and a permit.

The archbishop asked every parishioner-to-be to bring stones. Gradually millions of stones streamed in as people realized the government — likely believing the effort doomed to futility — was allowing the activity. Stones came by bag, pocket and suitcase. Cement was mixed with shovels in crude wooden boxes. And, just like the handmade cathedrals of old, the church at Nowa Huta rose, bit by painstaking bit.

And so it was. In May 1977, Archbishop Karol Wojtyla consecrated Our Lady Queen of Poland Church, also known as the Lord's Arc. Here are some photos of the Church.

I find this to be such an inspiring story because it illustrates how people chose under the leadership of the man who would become Pope St John Paul II such courage in the face of such blatant opposition.

As we keep Nowa Huta in mind, let me help you to better understand the story from the Gospel.

Let's consider first the players, the Pharisees and the Herodians. These groups were usually suspicious of one another, because the Herodians were in league with the Romans, to maintain the status quo and the Pharisees wanted to try to free themselves from Rome. When they ask Jesus the question about paying taxes to Caesar it is in order to entrap him with their words. They wanted to get him to side with the Herodians, so they could accuse him of being a Roman sympathizer, or with the Pharisees, and therefore frame him for wanting to rid Israel of the Romans. They had no intention of a thoughtful conversation about the relationship Judaism should have with the Roman government.

Jesus knows they are not sincere in their questioning and accuses them of being hypocrites. He then asks to see the coin for the tax. The coin given to Jesus was a denarius. It had an image of the emperor Tiberius with this inscription:

“Caesar Augustus Tiberius, son of the Divine Augustus.”

Now this is what we want to consider. Jesus is making it clear because the coin has the image of Caesar on it, the coin belongs to him. Another word for image is the word “icon”. Jesus is therefore stating that while the Romans might consider Tiberius a god, he Jesus does not. But the coin that bears his icon can be given to him.

However here is the heart of the story. What does Jesus mean when he says give to “God the things that are God’s?” This is where we need to stay with this word icon, or image. In Genesis chapter 1 at verse 27 we read that human beings are made in the image of God, we are the icon of God. Therefore Jesus is teaching in the passage that while the coin belongs to the emperor we belong to God. Why is that?

Because of what we affirm in today’s Psalm:

***For great is the LORD, and greatly to be praised;
he is to be revered above all gods.***

***⁵ For all the gods of the peoples are idols,
but the LORD made the heavens.***

***⁶ Honor and majesty are before him;
strength and beauty are in his sanctuary.¹***

It is this claim, that the Lord God is the true God who made the heavens, and the gods of the peoples are but idols, that is they are false gods. And so often they demand their image be the one that is worshipped. In the Greek translation of this psalm it says the idols are actually demons. What do demons want to do? Completely destroy what it means to be people who know God and are made in his image.

¹ [*The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*](#) (Ps 96:4–6). (1993). National Council of Churches of Christ.

Think about this in relation to Nowa Huta. The idols/demons of communism wanted to erase all trace of the true God and what it means to be made in his image. Nowa Huta was to reflect nothing but the ideology of communism.

May I suggest that something similar is happening today in our culture; The understanding of being made in God's image is being replaced by radical gender ideology. And just as the communists would seek to indoctrinate the young, the same thing is happening in some of our schools and universities. Children as young as eight are being taught gender fluidity as they are exposed to the pronoun selection that blurs the genders of male and female. Such an ideology distorts what it means to be made in God's image. Genesis 1.27 reads:

**God created human beings;
he created them godlike,
Reflecting God's nature.
He created them male and female²**

What we want to realize is that in every generation there will be those influences that will say render everything to Caesar because idolatry influenced by demonic forces are very powerful.

So how can we be inspired to follow the example of those who at Nowa Huta were able to give to God what was rightfully his?

In the 17th century there was a theologian named St Lawrence of Brindisi. In commenting on today's gospel he wrote:

To each, must be given what belongs to him. This, surely, is a judgment full of heavenly wisdom and instruction. For it teaches that authority is twofold, having an earthly and human aspect, and a heavenly and divine aspect. It teaches that we owe a twofold duty of obedience: to human laws and to the law of God. The coin bearing Caesar's likeness and inscription must be given to Caesar, and the one stamped with the divine image and likeness must be given to God. We bear the imprint of your glorious face, O Lord. We are made in the image and likeness of God. So you, O Christian, because you are a human being, are God's tribute money— a little coin bearing the image and likeness of the divine emperor.²

This is what we want to affirm today, that as those made in God's image we are to live as good and faithful citizens of the land we call Canada. However, our primary allegiance and understanding of our identity is not to be formed by radical gender politics but by the teaching of our Lord. This gives us a perspective guarding us from being trapped, by those who would try to ensnare us with their words.

We are God's tribute money. We render to Caesar what is his, and to God what is due him.

² Peterson, E. H. (2005). [*The Message: the Bible in contemporary language*](#) (Ge 1:27). NavPress.