

Homily for 29th Sunday Ordinary TimeOctober 17-18th 2020***God's Tribute Money***

St. Lawrence of Brindisi lived in the early 17th century. He had something very thoughtful to say about today's Gospel passage:

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.¹

In these few sentences St Lawrence captures the essence of the Gospel reading. He speaks of authority being twofold:

The Earthly and human aspect where we are to be governed by human laws. This would be the authority of the governing powers -

The heavenly and divine aspect, which is the higher law.

Yesterday we celebrated the Feast Day of St Ignatius of Antioch. He understood that the divine law is greater than human law. In 107 AD, the Emperor Trajan came to Antioch where he demanded the Christians to choose between apostasy or death. He then threatened Ignatius, the Bishop of the Church there with these words when he was brought before him:

“Who are you, poor devil, who sets our commands at naught”? “Call not him ‘poor devil’ Ignatius countered, “who bears God within him”. When the emperor questioned him about the meaning, the saint explained that he bore in his heart Christ crucified for his sake. Trajan then sentenced St Ignatius be transported to Rome where he would be torn to pieces by the wild beasts.

St Ignatius knew deeply that “*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.*

Let us understand know how both Saints Ignatius and Lawrence were able to live with such clarity in acknowledging the supreme authority of God under whom all human authority is ordered.

¹ Lawrence of Brindisi, Opera Omnia 8.336; trans. E. Barnecutt

In our Gospel for today we see the Pharisees team up with the Herodians, who are political supporters of the Herodian dynasty and its cooperative relationship with Rome. To put it mildly, these two groups are neither friends nor allies of each other. The Pharisees are religious patriots, bitterly opposed to Roman rule, whereas the Herodians are content to work together with the Gentile powers that be. The present alliance is made solely for the purpose of bringing down Jesus. This encounter happens during Holy Week.

Their devious intent is camouflaged behind extravagant flattery. Courteously addressing Jesus as Teacher, they begin gushing with one compliment after another. He is said to be a truthful man who teaches the way of God and is not influenced by anyone else's opinion or status. Jesus is now primed, they presume, to speak his mind boldly.

The trap comes in the form of a question: Is it lawful to pay the census tax to Caesar or not? The Pharisees are trying to force Jesus into a dilemma. By giving him only two options for an answer, they hope to back him into one of two predicaments. If Jesus affirms the propriety of the tax, he will come off as a Roman sympathizer, discrediting himself in the eyes of numerous Jews for whom the Roman rule of Judea was an intolerable burden. On the other hand, if Jesus forbids paying the tax, the Herodians are sure to report him to Roman authorities for instigating a tax revolt. The last time a charismatic Galilean led a tax revolt in Palestine the Romans responded with appallingly brutal force.

Immediately Jesus detects their malice and knows that they are testing him. So he asks them to show him the coin that pays the census tax. Little did they realize what was happening - by producing the coin used for the tax, the Pharisees are publicly exposed as hypocrites. They may oppose Roman taxation in principle, but apparently they are in the habit of paying it just like every other Palestinian Jew.

Holding up the coin, Jesus asks: "Whose image is this and whose inscription?" The coin in question is the silver Roman denarius. It was stamped with a side view of the head of Tiberius Caesar, the Roman emperor from AD 14 to 37, accompanied by an inscription that hailed him "the son of the divine Augustus." On the flip side of the coin he was declared "high priest." These overtly religious claims could not have been more offensive to Jewish sensibilities.

Next we hear the anticipated response. Instead of walking into the trap, Jesus slips through it, taking advantage of the situation to make an important point. He says, "Then repay to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God". Just as Jesus exposed his questioners as hypocrites, so now he exposes their question as a false dilemma. He is saying that political and religious obligations can both be legitimately met. Paying taxes is not a compromise of one's duties toward God, nor does serving God exempt one from supporting the civil government.

But this is not all the statement reveals, for Jesus implicitly subordinates the claims of Caesar to the claims of God. If the Roman coin bears Caesar's image, then it belongs to him and should be given back to him. But what is it that "belongs to God"? It is the human person, who bears the image of the living God

So God created humankind in his image,

*in the image of God, he created them;
male and female he created them.²*

It is because St. Lawrence clearly understood our Lord's teaching that he could say:

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.

What does this mean for us? Our highest obligation in life—and one that is imposed on every man, woman, and child, regardless of nationality or citizenship—is to give ourselves back to our Maker. In our time the political climate is so charged because of COVID and the election season taking place in the US. We can believe that the most important authority are human authorities, as the denarius coin falsely represented. The Romans claimed Tiberius Caesar was the most important authority. But as our Old Testament Lesson makes clear, when in 537 BC Cyrus, the king of Persia, was the dominant world leader – there is another ruler whose authority surpasses that of any earthly king:

*I am the LORD, and there is no other;
besides me there is no god.
I arm you, though you do not know me,
⁶ so that they may know, from the rising of the sun
and from the west, that there is no one besides me;
I am the LORD, and there is no other.³*

May we be orientated in such a way that it is the Good News of Jesus informing how we put into perspective the political news of October 2020. Like St Ignatius and St. Lawrence may we be good citizens who give to Caesar the things that are his and to God our whole self because:

You O Christian, are God's tribute money— a little coin bearing the image and likeness of the divine emperor.

² [The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition](#). (1993). (Ge 1:27). Washington, DC: National Council of Churches of Christ.

³ [The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition](#). (1993). (Is 45:5–6). Washington, DC: National Council of Churches of Christ.