

29th Sunday A (Matt 22:15-21)

As we glance at the daily newspapers or turn on the local TV news, we're bombarded with a vast array of political issues, a bombardment fueled by massive fundraising. And we toss out the unread junk mail. Will it be yes or no on Prop. 74? or Prop. 80? or Prop whatever? And you have to read the analyses and the arguments and the rebuttals to really understand in order to vote intelligently. "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's" says Jesus in today's Gospel, as he calls us to assume personal responsibility for how we are governed, and how our government, local and national, affects all Americans, and other nations beyond our borders in a world that has become a virtual global village.

"Give to God what is God's," Jesus tells us also. Not uncommonly down through the centuries there have been conflicts between what one gives to Caesar, or to civil authority, and what one gives to God. Instead of legislating on the matter of the payment of taxes which was proposed to him by the Pharisees and Herodian sympathizers who were out to trap him in his speech, Jesus refrained from giving pat answers. He provided his listeners with a principle whose application he left to their responsible consciences.

Christians continue, both wittingly and unwittingly, to pay taxes which promote barriers between ethnic and religious groups, fund abortions, finance nuclear arms, train assassins, and to support the supply of lethal weapons to countries that kill and maim their own people. None of this is a redemptive exercise, nor any lasting solution to the personal, painful trauma of unwanted pregnancy or the global inability or unwillingness of powerful leaders to agree for the very survival of our world. At such times, shouldn't we be asking: What does it mean here and now to be legal and for Caesar? What does it mean here and now to be loving and to be for God? St. Thomas More, Daniel Berrigan, Martin Luther King, Jesuit Alfred Delp in a Nazi concentration camp, St. Joan of Arc, Archbishop Romero are but a few who have given to God when Caesar demanded otherwise. There have been many more, and many do so quietly about us.

The decision to give to God when there is a conflict about what is demanded by Caesar is ours alone to make, for we are called by God to make responsible decisions. For us Christians, these decisions must be made with the Gospels as the touchstone, the norm by which we choose, in the midst of the Church, to make loving decisions in our lives. With St. Paul in today's reading from his First Letter to the Thessalonians, "For our Gospel did not come to you in word alone, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit with much conviction." It is with the power of the Spirit in the Gospels and in prayerful discernment that we are called to make our decisions as people of integrity, true to ourselves and to the heavenly Father who loves us beyond our wildest dreams. Our call is to live out our decisions in responsible love for one another. And we gather to give thanks for the gift of our Lord and brother, Jesus.

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