

**Twenty Ninth Sunday in Ordinary Time A - To Caesar what's Caesar and to God what is God's.**  
October 22, 2023

This Sunday is Mission Sunday. We are a missionary Church. We are sent by the Lord to spread his word and do his work. The Christian Gospel is not for us to cling to for our own benefit. Rather, it is like seeds for us to spread. Jesus sends the disciples two by two. We do this work together, with others, in community. Ministers need people to support them, pray for them, talk to them, challenge them. St. Francis of Assisi had an experience of God and then, within months, gathered people around him; St. Dominic, from the beginning, had brothers in his work; St. Teresa of Kolkata attracted a number of her former students to join her in her mission. We don't go it alone. Pius XI proclaimed St Therese of Lisieux a saint in 1925 and in 1927 patron saint of missions. As Pope Francis in his recent Apostolic Exhortation for the 150th anniversary of the birth of St, Therese of the Child of Jesus and the Holy Father said: "In her cell, the Saint from Lisieux wrote: *"Jesus is my one love"*. Analyzing her spiritual experience, the Pope observes that her encounter with Jesus "summoned her to the mission", so much so that she did not conceive "her consecration to God apart from the pursuit of the good of her brothers and sisters.". She had entered Carmel, in fact, "to save souls". Therese expressed her missionary spirit in this way: *"I feel that the more the fire of love burns within my heart ... the more also the souls who will approach me ... will run swiftly in the odour of the ointments of their Beloved, for a soul that is burning with love cannot remain inactive"* She rendered what belongs to God physically and spiritually.

In these final weeks of the Church's year, our readings from Matthew's gospel point towards what lies ahead. This Sunday's gospel (Matthew 22:15-21) and that of next Sunday (Matthew 22:34-40) tell of the growing confrontation with the nation's leaders that will lead to Jesus' death. And in our last three readings from Matthew's gospel Jesus warns that the end is approaching. Matthew's brief account tells us a great deal about the situation that was developing in the last days of Jesus' life. The Jewish people bitterly resented the Roman occupation of their country; now, those who have turned against Jesus exploit this explosive situation to discredit him. The dilemma that Jesus is placed in by the question put to him about the paying the Roman tax is brought out by the Pharisees and Herodians. The Pharisees represent Jews who have a real problem of conscience paying the tax. Strict Pharisees would have considered the inscription on the denarius which almost certainly read, 'Tiberius Caesar, son of the divine Augustus, great high priest' to be blasphemous. This influential group, dedicated to upholding the traditions of God's people, would have asked themselves whether they were compromising their principles by paying their tax with this coin. If Jesus encouraged paying the tax, he would not only offend the Pharisees, but also antagonize the common people who so resented the Roman rule. The Herodians, followers of Herod - the puppet ruler in league with the Romans - had no scruples concerning the tax. If Jesus condemned paying the tax, he could be denounced for subversion.

Jesus, in saying ***To Caesar what belongs to Caesar; and to God what belongs to God***' turns the question back on his interrogators - taking the discussion beyond the level of the partisanship they are trying to exploit. He tells them that they are faced with a decision of conscience. Even in our own times, involvement in the political life of the nation is not a straightforward matter. The Romans had originally occupied Palestine at the invitation of Jewish leaders, bringing a relative stability that replaced a situation of continuing anarchy. The contemporaries of Jesus must ask themselves whether the presence of the Romans was the lesser of two evils. This Sunday's first reading from the later Isaiah writings (45:1, 4-6) is well chosen. Cyrus - who 'does not know' the God of Israel - is called by the prophet God's 'anointed' as he fulfills God's designs, sending the Jewish exiles back from captivity after his defeat of the Babylonians. God is Lord of all, certainly, Jesus is telling his listeners; but Jewish conscience must judge whether the Roman presence is providential, preventing a worse situation. We should note that Jesus invites the people to make their own judgment of conscience; he does not make it for them.

***"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, trying to back Jesus into a corner no matter what he answered. But Jesus 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. The phrase "Render to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's," has deeper implications, particularly to us here in Canada. The gospel reminds us that we are members of God's kingdom and citizens of the country in which we live, with obligations to both. We need to support our government by paying our fair share in taxes. No one likes taxes, but all of us want to know that our country is protecting us and taking good care of us. All of us who pay taxes, from local to federal, are invested in our government whether we like it or not. A good christian keeping his thoughts on heaven while having his feet firmly planted on earth, can love God and country and be faithful to both.

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 Philippians 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. Many of us remember the answer to **"Why did God make me."** It was: **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. The New Catechism of the Catholic Church expands on "To Know Him": "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 trillion ways that the 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. God made me, and you, and every man or woman who has ever lived or ever will live, to love Him and to be the saving hands of Christ. We are called to spread the good news in different ways, on many levels. Every person must show a proper interest in the well-being of society. Living in an imperfect world highlights the need for christians in public life to be bold in expressing their allegiance to God in social and religious affairs. Their vision should point out spiritual values which others fail to take into account. Sadly, how many can we find in today's world. However, we should not fall into despair. The most important goal for all of us is to work out our salvation. Giving God his due is a lifelong effort. This is something we must keep uppermost in our minds. We have to love and serve God by loving and serving other people because God's presence is in them. 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. Real love is to love the other for the good of the other. 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 you and me 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. It is so wonderful when we are completely united to God. That is heaven.