

TWENTY-NINTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME: OCTOBER 18, 2020

Every twelve years this passage from Matthew's gospel appears on a Sunday in October previous to an American presidential election. Many listeners immediately think it refers to the separation of church and state. That concept would have been unintelligible to first century people of Rome or Judea.

The focus of the gospel today is a group of religious leaders who tried to force Jesus to choose between acting like a prophetic rebel, or a heretical collaborator who honored the pagan emperor. Jesus refused to play their either/or games. When Jesus asks them to show him a coin, they exposed themselves in the act of dealing with graven images. Possessing that coin was a tacit admission that they were not above collaborating with the Romans. The coin for observant Jews was an idolatrous image.

Jesus does not condemn them. He sends them off with a brilliantly enigmatic saying, "Repay to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God." Jesus directs them to deeper issues. "Is there anything in creation that does not belong to God? If not, then what?"

Jesus respected the state and its role. Elsewhere in the gospel, he has Peter pay their taxes. But God cannot be left out of the secular scene. The sacred and secular are intertwined since God is present in everyone and everything.

There is a saying that goes around that the teachings on social justice are the best kept secret in the Catholic Church. For years after the Protestant Reformation the focus of religion was individual salvation. It's all between me and Jesus. But that was not the gospel teaching that prevailed in the early church. The importance of the common good as sometimes superseding individual rights has always been part of church doctrine. And it has been brought back into focus in modern times. In the 1890s Pope Leo XIII wrote the first of what have become the social encyclicals. The topic then was on the rights of the laboring class and just wages and treatment. In the United States Cardinal James Gibbons and others took up this teaching to work for workers' rights. Many other social encyclicals have followed from Pius XI, Pius XII, John XXIII, John Paul II, Benedict XVI and, in our days, Pope Francis. In 1965 the Second Vatican Council directed the church, after years of retrenchment, to turn towards the world and the needs of all people,

especially the poor. In the Pastoral Constitution, *Gaudium et Spes*, the Council taught:

“The joys and hopes, the grief and anguish of the people of our time, especially the poor or afflicted, are the joys and hopes, the grief and anguish of the followers of Christ as well. Nothing that is genuinely human fails to find an echo in their hearts.”

Pope Francis has brought the Council alive with his teachings and powerful example. Five years ago, he authored the encyclical, *Laudato Si, Care for our Common Home*, which treats the gospel imperatives and moral demands that the crisis in the world’s environment has brought about, especially for the poor.

Two weeks ago, the Pope released a new encyclical, *Fratelli tutti*, which, as he was writing it, became his recommendations in the present pandemic for the healing of the earth. In its most simplified form, the encyclical teaches that we must turn “I” into “We,” and become conscious of our unity with all the world’s peoples and creatures. He does not provide policies but puts forth the basic values needed among us all. What the world needs is the realization that every member of the human race is brother or sister to every other member, no matter how distant or unfamiliar. Social division, fragmentation and the friction they cause are the primary threats that humankind has to fears. This includes the possibility of unprecedented destructive wars, unbridled economic growth, individualism, consumerism, the abuse of the created world. He condemns capital punishment, questions the just war theory in our times. He holds up the dignity and rights of all human beings at every stage of life.

Part of the encyclical is a meditation of the parable of the Good Samaritan as a model for life today. The entire document shows that the heart of Francis’ papacy is a Gospel-based leadership rooted in the spirit of St. Francis of Assisi. He is not afraid to be critical of the Church as well. He pitches the document to all people of good will. He draws inspiration from such non-Catholic sources such as Martin Luther King, Jr, Mahatma Gandhi, and Archbishop Desmond Tutu.

This then is a call to Catholics in particular to take a stance in the pandemic and, hopefully, post pandemic world to come. The crises the world is going through

can be a challenge and an opportunity. The Pope leads us in looking at our beliefs, our values, our commitment to follow Christ, and our trust in a merciful God.

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