

Giving What is "Owed"

29th Sunday in Ordinary Time – Year A

Isaiah 45:1, 4-6
Psalm 96:1, 3, 4-5, 7-8, 9-10

1 Thessalonians 1:1-5b
Matthew 22:15-21

In our politically charged society, a byproduct of one in which voting and citizen participation in the political process is paramount, there has grown a hypersensitivity among some against anything that even hints of violating the doctrine of "separation of Church and State." Although the Founding Fathers, some of them secular atheists, wrote and spoke highly of religious values as the bulwark of a society, providing the moral foundation that is needed in a democratic republic in order to function and survive, lest it descend over time into tyranny, the modern notion of this separation has led many to interpret the First Freedom of the Bill of Rights as a freedom *from* religion, rather than a Freedom *Of* Religion.

Two things have resulted from this interpretation. First, the political realm is now seen as a great secular shelter from all things religious, with, among other things, the ballot box as the great secular confessional where even people of deep religious faith, can, and indeed must, be non-religious with a supposed, spiritual and moral impunity. The second is the understanding that once a person, and especially an issue, particularly

a religious one -- such as institution of marriage and the sanctity of life - enters the political realm, it is then considered off-limits to all moral and, especially, religious consideration.

"Render to Caesar the things that are Caesars and to God the things that are God's" is the great rallying cry for some who attempt to religiously advocate the non-

religious orientation of modern politics. However, noting the manner in which the Pharisees initially brought the issue of the secular tax for Jesus' comment -- they sought to trap Him -- I often wonder if such a convenient misinterpretation would really be one given by Jesus, especially with his rather crafty insinuations in the face of such attempts at

entrapment. Nothing with Jesus is ever that cut-and-dry.

Being a follower of Christ means and includes being a good citizen. Indeed, St. Peter advocates this, giving specific reference to respect toward those responsible for governing (1 Peter 2:13-17). Paul teaches the same (Romans 13:1-7). While taxes may be somewhat excessive and the payment of them annoying to say the



"Render to Caesar..."

least, the Church, nonetheless, teaches: "Submission to authority and co-responsibility for the common good make it morally obligatory to pay taxes, to exercise the right to vote, and to defend one's country" (CCC 2240).

There is, however, as always with Christ, a catch . . .

In dodging the Pharisaical attempt to entrap with a phrase that includes, "[render] to God the things that are God's" is not Jesus reminding us that, while *some* things are Caesars, *all* things are God's; while *some* things are due to the government, *all* things are due to God; while *some* things are out of the political realm, *nothing* is out of the spiritual, moral and religious realm of God, because in the end, "*You must live as servants of God*" (1 Pt 2:16), because "*all authority that exists is*

established by God" (Rom 13:1b)?

Jesus has shown us the way; that all things are owed to God. While Jesus was able to evade the scrutiny of the Pharisees, nowhere can we escape the scrutiny of God.

While we render to "Caesar" what is "Caesar's" in the context and realm of "Caesar", everyone, in every context, even that of "Caesar" and, indeed, even "Caesar", himself, must "*render to God the things that are Gods.*"

This makes politics, not a realm in which we are shielded from religious values, but, rather, a realm in which God's scrutiny to what is owed is at its most taxing.

Fr. Bill Nicholas
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