

TWENTY-NINTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME, YEAR A, OCTOBER 18, 2020

"Repay to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God" (Matthew 22:21).

Have you had the experience of engaging in a conversation with someone on a point that is essential for both of you when, without warning, the person changes the topic to something totally different from the matter under consideration? Have you ever experienced someone who thinks that things about God are old wives' tales and that heaven, hell and purgatory are cock and bull stories? Have you ever encountered someone who dismisses religion as myth, unimportant, private and dispensable? Sometimes you might even encounter within your immediate family circle people who say with a straight face that they are atheists, agnostics or anarchists?

To some extent the people who rejected God's invitation to the Wedding feast, to the joys of heaven are like the people mentioned above. The same is true of the disciples of Pharisees and Herodians to whom our Lord presented the image of heaven. Rather than give it a consideration, they quickly changed the topic to the issue of paying taxes to Caesar in a fruitless effort to entrap our Lord. The Lord pointed out the way to happiness, fulfilment and salvation, but they did not want to hear it. What a tragedy?

What can you do when such a worldview and the attitude exhibited by the Pharisees and Herodians confront you? What can you do when your husband, son, granddaughter, girlfriend or co-worker is a Marxist, anti-God, anti-Church and anti-religion? One thing that you must avoid is hair-splitting arguments because it leads to nowhere. What you do is to calmly pray, study the faith and share it with love and conviction. Once you propose the faith, leave the matters in God's hand. Do not press the issue.

What is the cause of culture wars and lack of belief in God in our society today? In our high schools and colleges, there are so-called teachers who cannot wait to sow confusion and doubts about God and religion in the minds of the young. They themselves were influenced by the thoughts of atheistic writers like Karl Marx, Frederich Nietzsche, Jean Paul Satre and David Hume. They take as dogma the thoughts of those biased thinkers and present an evolutionary view of life which makes nonsense of God and religion.

Our Lord gives a tool in the scripture to combat this Godless and secular view of life. In the gospel, he says, "Repay to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God" (Matthew 22:21). Who is Caesar and who is God and what belongs to each? Caesar represents the political powers of this earthly city. Broadly speaking, Caesar connotes the things of the flesh, of the world and of the temporal order. What belongs to Caesar are the things that pertain to being citizens of this world. These include keeping the civil laws, traffic codes, paying taxes and other civic

responsibilities. God is the grounds of our existence. We owe our life, existence and essence to him. Without him nothing comes to be. He is the one who gives us the capacity to love, think and hope and desire. What belongs to God? Our entire being. Roman coins bore the image of Caesar but we bear the image of God. We are made in his image and likeness (Genesis 1:26-27). We must give the Romans coins to Caesar but we must give ourselves to God.

The first reading illustrated this with the story of Cyrus, a pagan king of Persia. Miraculously, God gave him power to take down Babylon, the colossus of the eight century BC that had trampled down and enslaved many nations including Israel. At the height of Babylon's pride, the king of Persia conquered it and released those countries that Babylon held in captivity. The Lord makes it known that he is the one who granted victory to Cyrus, "I am the LORD and there is no other, there is no God besides me. It is I who arm you, though you know me not, so that toward the rising and the setting of the sun people may know that there is none besides me" (Isaiah 45:6).

The Responsorial Psalm invites us to give God the honor due to his holy name, "Give the Lord glory and honor. Give to the LORD, you families of nations, give to the LORD glory and praise; give to the LORD the glory due his name!" (Psalm 96:7-8). The example of Cyrus helps us to see that the whole world is in the hand of God. No matter how loud the anti-God slogans might be espoused or shouted, it does not make God irrelevant. The emptiness of the lives of the peddlers of religionless society

helps all who have eyes to see that excluding God in the public and private domain spells doom.

God does not want his children to live a diminished and empty life. He does not tire of calling out. "There is no just and saving God but me. Turn to me and be safe, all you ends of the earth, for I am God; there is no other!" (Isaiah 45:21-22). Are you tempted to bracket God or put religion on the back burner? The Lord invites you to turn a new leaf and you will see that it pays to, "Repay to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God" (Matthew 22:21). Do not live your life as if there is no God. As Catholics, though our citizenship is in heaven, we are called to be conscientious, law-abiding citizens of the temporal city of the world as well. We must worship God, not money, man or Marxist ideologies.

With Abbot Columban, a sixth-century Irish missionary, we pray for the grace to recognize and acknowledge the primacy of God in our lives. "Inspire in us the depth of love that is fitting for you to receive as God. So may your love pervade our whole being, possess us completely, and fill all our senses, that we may know no other love but love for you who are everlasting. May our love be so great that the many waters of sky, land and sea cannot extinguish it in us" (Columban the Abbot, Office of the Reading Tuesday, Third Week, October 13, 2020).