

**Homily for October 20, 2002
29th Sunday in Ordinary Time A**

By Father Charles Bowes

**Isaiah 45:1, 4-6
Thessalonians 1:1-5b
Matthew 22:15-21**

When all is said and done, everything belongs to God.

Several years ago when I suffered from a severe depression, I consulted a physician to help me. At one point in our conversation I said in frustration, “Doctor, just tell me what to do and I’ll take the necessary steps.” And I’ll never forget what I thought to be an extraordinary response: “I have too much respect for you to tell you what to do,” the doctor said.

Folks, that’s what Jesus is saying in this famous passage from Saint Matthew’s gospel, chapter 22: “Repay to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God.” In other words, Jesus is shown proclaiming that the burden of responsibility for politics and all of human life belongs to us – it is not dictated by the divine.

For centuries, various Christian churches have seen this passage of scripture as a mandate to remain uninvolved in political affairs. The opposite is true. Involvement in human and political affairs is a must for a Christian. And there are no easy answers. Ultimately, everything is in God’s hands and whatever decision we make, we are disposing of the gifts God

gives us, using the talents and wisdom God gives us, to serve church and state and one another.

The story is quite straightforward and simple: folks try to trip Jesus up by making him side either in payment of a tax which would then be supporting the occupying hostile forces, or Jesus could counsel not to pay the tax in which case he would be subject to death as a leader of sedition and rebellion.

By the time this passage was written, however, the temple had been destroyed and there was an effort under foot by Jewish Christians of Saint Matthew’s community to try to find new ways to relate to the Romans – which, by the way, has been the genius of the Church through the centuries – to work within existing political structures and to make them Christian or at least open to the invasion of God as revealed in Jesus Christ. For these early Christians were like their Jewish forbearers, people of the authentic Torah and the risen Christ was incarnate in their midst. So Jesus’ response in this passage represents the community’s intention to coexist with its Roman rulers. But this did not mean that the early Christians became politically passive, because both in Jewish and Christian understanding there was a clear conviction that ultimately all history, all dominion, and all power were

in God's hands. "Repay to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God," says Jesus. On the surface the answer seems to be equivalent to saying, "You should vote your conscience." But below the surface, Jesus is saying that everything belongs to God and therefore give God everything. Give to Caesar what belongs to him, which is nothing. That doesn't spell out what we are to do. Rather than dictate the various obligations of state and church, each of us, each Christian, is to actively participate in the coming of God's kingdom. Each of us, each Christian, is to interpret responsibly the claims of God and the limits of political power. There is no sense in which these verses advocate a neutral political stance for the Christian. On the contrary, since everything belongs to God, these words provide the foundation for a radical critique of every political power that usurps what belongs to God alone.

Before Roman general (and later emperor) Titus ordered the destruction of Jerusalem's temple in the year 70 AD, he insisted on personally investigating the Holy of Holies. Ordering his troops to postpone leveling the city until his curiosity was satisfied, the pagan Titus sacrilegiously entered the Holy of Holies, the place where only the Jewish high priest could enter once per year. Stepping over the bodies of Jewish freedom fighters and priests, Titus pulled down the drapes of this most sacred place on Earth. Then, the great conqueror of Jerusalem began uncontrollably and robustly laughing, exclaiming, "I have solved the great riddle of the Jews! There is nothing here!"

20 years after Titus laughed at God, his successor, the emperor Domitian, is reported to have ordered the disciple John to appear before him. Domitian Caesar was puzzled as to why so many were attracted to Christ and led away from the emperor's cult. He was even more amazed that the disciple who was leading so many astray was such a small, insignificant-looking old man. Domitian, whose image was featured on all the coins of the empire, demanded that John reveal to him the secret treasure of the Church so that he would know why so many, at great peril, were rejecting him for Christ.

John returned to the imperial court the next day, accompanied by a beggar, a widow, and an orphan. "These are the treasures of the Church," he informed Caesar. The emperor reacted with uncontrolled laughter, exiling John to the island of Patmos, and persecuting Christians with more fervor than ever.

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