

## **TWENTY-NINTH SUNDAY A/2005**

The very recent natural calamities, which happened in South Asia with the Tsunami and in New Orleans with the hurricane Katrina, have been an occasion for many people to raise questions about God's omniscience and his way of governing the world. Most of the questions mean this: is God interested in us and in our problems, or does he, from time to time simply remind us of his existence through some extraordinary events? Is it God or chance that guides events? Then why are the events of history and of our lives so mysterious and unintelligible?

Today's readings try to answer these questions, each in their own way, by showing the right way through which we can understand God's plan. The 1<sup>st</sup> reading shows that God is interested and guides the events of history so that everything may lead to the good and happiness of his people. God is a Father who is always with us every moment, be it at a time of joy or a time of sorrow. He can make use of any person and event to realize his plans. He is free to choose the means he likes, even a pagan or an unbeliever, to communicate his salvation. It is in this way he has used Cyrus, a pagan King, to free Israel from the Babylonian slavery, to bring them back and to help rebuild the temple. In this context, every political power is worth being respected, because God can use it in a mysterious way for the good of his people.

This statement allows us to understand the answer Jesus gives to the embarrassing question of whether or not it was lawful to pay the tax. Jesus' reply, "Repay to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God", sets the basis of our duties and rights as Christians and citizens of our society. To give to Caesar what is his and to God what is due to him, what does it mean?

Several interpretations have been given to these words. Some heads of States have used this statement to say that Christians and the Church should not meddle in politics. This has been the case in many countries where the dictatorship has prevailed, especially when the government has been criticized for its bad management. For some Christians, Jesus has established that the State has no right to interfere in religious problems. Jesus' saying was used also to justify the right of the Church to own material goods. And finally, this statement was used in the commonplace argument that one must be given what one has a right to.

Without discussing all these options, the point I can make here is that, faith cannot be lived in a way that is unrelated to the reality of this world. Religion affects all options of the human person and all the moments of the person's life; thus it necessarily influences political options and the fulfillment of duties as citizen. Moreover, it is a moral as well as a civil duty to contribute to the common good through the payment of the taxes. Whatever the type of society and whatever the political or economic policies of the government, the Christian has to be an exemplary citizen. Even if the Christians have the right and the duty to make suggestions, to criticize and even to contest the various options taken, they cannot act in such a way as to damage the civil community.

But, what does Jesus mean when he says to give back to God what belongs to him? I understand it as an invitation to give to God everything we are and everything we have. First of all, as the coin has to be returned to his owner, the emperor, because it bears his image, so we must return to God the creature that bears his image, that is, human being. What do I mean here? I would like to say that, as human beings, nobody has a right to dominate us, to enslave us, to oppress us: we are sacred, we belong to God. I know that every era has had some people or institutions that considered the human person as an object and tried to enslave him. Exploitation of workers, prostitution, humiliation and mistreatment of one's partner, are all ways of treating the human person as an object. It is urgent that whoever has "stolen" the human person from God makes amends immediately.

The words of Jesus are also a reminder for the Christians to watch the behavior of the authorities, be ready to criticize, contest, and discuss with, whoever fails to respect the image of God in every person.

The last point I would like to underline is that we have to give also back to God the things we have received from him as gifts and presents. I do not develop this point today; I leave it to those who are to talk about the stewardship. Let us ask God to help us to live our commitments as Christians and citizen of our society. May God bless you all.



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