

Twenty-Ninth Sunday in Ordinary Time A/2014

The readings of this Sunday talk about the Christian identity. They show that human history is run by God's plan. They invite us to give to God what is due to him in the unfolding of human history.

The first reading describes the reign of King Cyrus over the land of Babylon. It shows that, though Cyrus was a pagan and did not know God, he was, however, chosen so that through his reign he might set the children of Israel free.

What is behind this text is the idea that, whatever might be the suffering of his people, God always comes to put an end to it. There is also the idea that God, in his power, can use any happening, in terms of a person or event, in order to achieve a good he wants for his beloved ones. The last idea is that human history is not neutral; it bears the marks of God's hand.

This text allows us to understand what is at stake in today's Gospel as Jesus recommends to give to God what is his and to Caesar what belongs to him. First of all, the Gospel starts with the intriguing question of the Pharisees and Herodians to Jesus in order to test him whether it was lawful to pay the census tax to Caesar.

Then, it reports on the answer of Jesus that avoided the dilemma by recommending to repay to Caesar what belongs to him and to God what belongs to him. What do we learn from this Gospel? Today I want to talk about Christian identity. Let me start this way. When people meet a person for the first time, like in the case of someone to whom they have given a job, they often say, "Tell me about you; "Talk to me about yourself".

In that question, there is certainly the question of identity so that the person may label himself by saying who he is as an individual and give the distinctive characteristics that make him unique and different from others. But, I believe also that there is the question of identification, understood as a process through which a person positions himself with regard to the issues people are dealing with in society.

The advantage of the question of identity is that, on the one hand, it allows the individual to define himself with regard to others and, on the other hand, to be aware of who he is and of the convictions of life that lead him to take a stand with regard to the main issues of life. That is why the question of identity is a reminder of the individual identity and his collective identity as well.

By coming before Jesus in asking the question of tax, the Pharisees, under the cover of their disciples and the Herodians, wanted him to give clearly his position with regard to Roman occupation and colonization.

Certainly that question was a trap, because it contained a dilemma. If Jesus said that the tax has to be paid to the Romans, he would be accused of not defending the national identity of the Jews and, therefore, of approving the Roman occupation. In that sense, his love of the country would be in doubt and his teaching as a moral and spiritual leader of the nation would be compromised. If, on the contrary, he declared that the tax should not be paid to the Romans, he would be accused by them as inciting the Jews to civil disobedience. In both cases, Jesus was in a very difficult position and any response he would give would be used against him.

The only way to avoid such a trap was for him to respond the way he did. By doing so, Jesus teaches us that every Christian has a double identity. In fact, we belong to the kingdom of God by our faith in Jesus Christ, but we are also a citizen of the country to which we belong. If we deny this fact, we fall into fanaticism.

Because of that double identity, we have a double obligation, namely vis-à-vis God and the Church and vis-à-vis the State and the country. In that perspective, to fulfill our social obligations and civil duties makes us not only accountable before God, but also a good citizen who gives to Caesar what belongs to him. In the same way, we can never avoid fulfilling our religious duties and obligations for any reason. To do so, would mean not to give to God what belongs to him.

One of the consequences of this double identity is that the social problems of people become the problems of the Church. The hunger and thirst of people become hunger and thirst of the Church. Whatever problem people are involved in civil society becomes of interest for the Church. In that sense, we have to treat the problems of people and not to avoid them. This is one of the foundations of the social teaching of the Church. It would be a denial of our double identity if we ignore the social problems of the nation and the citizen.

A challenge we face here is that when people do not fulfill their civil obligations, like paying the tax, for instance, the state will punish them with a fine. In this way, they feel compelled to act in order to avoid the punishment. With God, things are different. The Church does not punish us if we do not contribute to the life of the community. On the contrary, it appeals to our conscience so that we come to understand our obligations and duties vis-à-vis God and the Church. In that perspective, our conscience plays a big role.

Moreover, to say that we have a double identity means also that we have to keep ourselves in balance and right judgment with regard to the issues we are treating. For instance, when Jesus was asked whether it was lawful to pay the tax to Caesar or not, he did not jump on the occasion in order to say do it to God. On the contrary, he recognized the complexity of the situation and invited his listeners to give to Caesar his due and to God his. We need that balanced judgment today more than ever. The fact that we are Christians does not mean that necessarily all the problems we have require a religious answer. Each problem requires its particular solution according to its content, its nature and the circumstances in which it appears and the people involved in it.

That principle of balanced judgment does not mean, however, that we have to sacrifice our faith or dilute it; it means only that we should not become blind to the complexity of the problems and the situation before us. That is why we have to pray for the discernment of the Holy Spirit so that we do not become blinded and biased. We have to pray for that discernment today more than ever so that we come to do God's will and be good citizens and good Christians. God bless you all!

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



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