

Twenty-Ninth Sunday in Ordinary Time A/2020

I want to start this homily by referring to the general election. This is a period of time that God gives us, every four years, as an opportunity to discover anew our Christian identity and to re-define our obligations and our responsibilities as citizens of our country.

A simple question we cannot help asking in this regard is this: Who are we? Easily, we could say that we are Christians - Catholics, that is, people who belong to God and to his Kingdom through our faith in Jesus Christ in the Catholic Church. But, we are also citizens of this country to which we belong, in which we live and practice that faith in Jesus Christ.

To say so, means that each one of us has a double identity. We are both citizens of the kingdom of God and, at the same time, citizens of our country. One of the consequences from this double belonging is that human history – to which our country is related and which is secular in itself -, becomes the theater of God's mysterious action and through it God reaches out to us.

This idea is the main point of today's first reading. In order to better understand this text, it is good to remember the history of Israel. If I could summarize the history of Israel in few words, I would say that theirs is a history of exiles, one after another, until the holocaust.

The period related to the first reading is when Israel was under the domination of Babylonians (today Iraq). At that time, as the Babylonians had dominated Israel for many years, the king Cyrus of Persia (today Iran) raised a war against the Babylonians and defeated them. That defeat of the Babylonians will profit Israel because the new King will give freedom to the subjected Israelites so that they return to their land of origin.

The prophet Isaiah interprets that event as unfolding according to God's plan. For him, although Cyrus was a pagan and did not know God, God used him as his instrument in order to give freedom to his people. Therefore, it was the hand of God that led Cyrus to victory and, through him, gave peace and prosperity to his people.

In other words, God is the master of history. His invisible hand is behind human history. He directs all the events happening in human history according to his mysterious plan. This helps us understand what St Paul says in Romans 8: 25: "Everything works for the good of those who love God".

In that sense, God can use any person and even a pagan government in order to achieve a good for his beloved ones. This means also that there is a relationship between religion and politics. God is interested in what is happening in the world and guides the events of history so that everything may lead to the good and happiness of his people.

All that helps us understand the remarkable response of Jesus to the embarrassing question asked of him by the Pharisees, whether it was lawful or not to pay the tax to the emperor. That was a real dilemma. If Jesus said "no", he would have been accused of denying the authority of the emperor. If he said "yes", he would have been accused of collaborating with the Romans by rejecting the God of Israel. His answer, "Repay to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God", was the only way to put an end to that dilemma.

With this answer, Jesus wanted to say a couple of things. First of all, every Christian has a double citizenship. Because of that, there are social obligations and civil responsibilities that any Christian should fulfill for the sake of his country. It would be a mark of incivility not to pay the tax to the government and fulfill ones duties to the country. Rather, we should be responsible and good citizens who rend to Caesar what is his.

Second, as Christians, we are also citizens of the Kingdom of God. There are matters and problems in which our responsibility comes under God's guidance. We can never avoid fulfilling our religious duties and obligations for any reason. As we owe a lot to our government in terms of duties and obligations, we have the same obligations and demands when it is about God and our belonging to the Church. We have to recognize this fact and act consequently.

In terms of respect of human life and its dignity, it means that if the coin bears the image of Cesar, the man who poses the coin bears the image of God, his creator. It follows, then, that all human life is sacred because it is a gift from God and because man is made in the image of God. Therefore, no human life can be thrown away as we do with the trash of our homes. Any human life is important and should be protected any at cost, from the unborn, the handicapped to the innocent people killed in wars.

Now, here is a question. Do our religious and political obligations conflict? Sometimes, yes. In such a case, the priority should always be given to God who is the master of history and of all that happens in the world and in our lives. We have to obey God rather than human beings. However, in case of doubt about what is right to do; we have to follow our conscience as our ultimate judge.

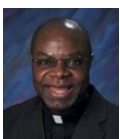
Moreover, as we have a double citizenship, our faith cannot be lived in a way unrelated to the reality of this world. It cannot be practiced in secret nor shall it be left out of major decisions we make in our lives. Our faith should affect the whole of our life, including the things we do on a daily basis. However, one thing is to let our faith guide us in the decision to make in life and another is to fall into religious extremism by losing sight of the balance and the discernment we have to bring in. Muslims, for lacking that balance, kill anyone who does not believe in their God. That should not be the same with Christians.

When Jesus recommends giving to Caesar what is his and to God his part, he is establishing the separation between the State and the Church. He is also establishing the principle of balance and right judgment in order to help us resolve the conflicts between faith and politics in the way that gives glory to God. Any blindness in this matter from both sides ignores Jesus' prudence and discernment that should guide our actions.

This Sunday is called World Mission Sunday. It invites us to pray and help the missionary work done throughout the universal church. St Paul reminds us of the importance of each other in the fulfillment of the work of the Lord. In this task we need each other and our various talents and gifts.

St Paul found the strength to keep working with the support of Silvanus and Timothy, his coworkers. In this time of ours, our Church needs your talents, your commitment and dedication to the work of the Lord. To be citizens of heaven is to care for the growth of the work of God. We have to work together, hand in hand, for the glory of God through the power of the Holy Spirit. What each one can bring according to his talent is always precious in the eyes of our Lord Jesus. May God bless you all for everything you do for the glory of his name and your eternal salvation! May God bless you all!

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



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