



In today's Gospel (Mt 22:15-21), the Pharisees maliciously unleash a plot to entrap Jesus. They ask Jesus a simple question: "Tell us, then, what is your opinion: Is it lawful to pay the census tax to Caesar or not?" Jesus' response is priceless:

Knowing their malice, Jesus said, "Why are you testing me, you hypocrites? Show me the coin that pays the census tax." Then they handed him the Roman coin. He said to them, "Whose image is this and whose inscription?" They replied, "Caesar's." At that he said to them, "Then repay to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God." (Matthew 22:18-21)

At this point you may be asking yourself, "What's the big deal? What was so 'malicious' about the Pharisees' question? What was so ingenious about Jesus' response?"

To understand the malicious nature of the question, we need more information. The Pharisees saw themselves as the bastion of Judaism. They believed Judaism was by nature a state religion and the Jewish people were to be separate in both government and religious practice from the rest of the world. So, the Pharisees vehemently opposed in principle the obligation of Jews to give money to an oppressive Roman (i.e. pagan/gentile) government. In their minds, if Jesus were a prophet He would openly, publicly, refuse the payment of taxes to Caesar. On the other hand, they knew that if he refused to pay, Caesar would consider him an insurrectionist and would have grounds execute Him. So it seemed, the Pharisees had Jesus between a rock and a hard place!

So, what was so ingenious about Jesus' response? In a nutshell, He pointed out that the coinage used to pay the tax had a graven image—contrary to Jewish law—of Caesar! The coinage itself was sacrilegious. It came from Caesar, belonged to Caesar, and had nothing to do with Jewish law. Thus, he concluded, we can lawfully give to Caesar what is Caesar's as long as we give to God what is God's. In this simple reply, Jesus laid down the principle for what we now call the separation of church and state.

The Pharisees did not want to give to Caesar what belonged to Caesar. Today, many Catholics refuse to give to God what belongs to God. The crux of the crisis today lies in the fact that our government or "Caesar," is increasingly taking that which belongs to God, and many, perhaps we could even say most, baptized Catholics have become ship-wrecked in their faith because they are giving to Caesar what belongs to God! For example, to whom does it belong, Caesar or God, to define the nature of marriage? Does a five to four vote of the Supreme Court change God's mind? Who determines whether or not abortion is morally acceptable? Do the opinions of politicians determine what is right and wrong in the eyes of God? Does God, who is the creator and judge of all, wait for the latest poll or majority vote to determine the moral law? Unfortunately, many Catholic politicians have sold their souls to endorse laws that have become popular, but remain directly contrary to the divine and natural law and therefore do great violence to the common good. Similarly, many Catholics believe they can determine for themselves what the moral law entails even if it violates Church teaching—they refuse to give to God what belongs to God.

In matters of faith and morals, it does not matter what Caesar/the world/society/politicians or polls say! Our motives for assent to the doctrinal and moral teachings of the Catholic Church are simple: 1) We know these truths belong to God, and 2) He has revealed them to us in Christ through His Church which He founded for this purpose! We cannot give to Caesar what belongs to God; we cannot give to ourselves what belongs to God—we do not privately determine which moral laws are "right for me." We belong to God. We must give to God what belongs to God. We give ourselves to God precisely by humbly holding fast—with loyalty, love, and devotion—what He has taught us. Jesus said it quite bluntly, "Whoever is ashamed of me and of my words in this faithless and sinful generation, the Son of Man will be ashamed of when he comes in his Father's glory with the holy angels" (Mark 8:38). These words of Jesus make it imperative for us to understand Jesus' simple, yet ingenious, command to give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God.

Your Servant in Christ,
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