

"Then repay to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God." These are the words of our Lord Jesus from today's Gospel as He responds to a cleverly crafted "gotcha" question from His enemies, the Pharisees and the Herodians, who, we're explicitly told by Matthew, sought to "entrap Jesus in speech."

Just to provide some historical context to today's Gospel, the Roman emperor at the time is Tiberius, who ruled from 14-37 AD. And the two groups in today's Gospel, the Pharisees and the Herodians, are two completely different sociopolitical factions. At the time in first-century Roman Palestine, the Pharisees were those Jewish religious leaders who were vehemently opposed to the Roman occupation and therefore to the payment of Roman taxes, which they viewed as inherently unlawful for faithful Jews and a blatant violation of the Jewish Law, the Torah.

On the other hand, the Herodians were a political faction that was loyal to the Herod regime, which was the political dynasty that acted as puppet rulers throughout Palestine on behalf of the Romans. The Herodians generally supported Roman rule through the Herod dynasty

and had no problem with the payment of Roman taxes. So the fact that these two polar opposite factions are united in today's Gospel, shows just how much they hated Jesus.

So their strategy in asking Jesus the question, "Is it lawful to pay the census tax to Caesar or not?" is this: if Jesus answers "yes," then the Pharisees will try to discredit Him among the Jewish people and accuse him of being unfaithful to the Jewish Law and to the cause of Jewish independence. If Jesus answers "no," then the Herodians can accuse Him of treason against the Roman empire and have him arrested. So our Lord, in His divine brilliance, provides an answer that evades the trap of both the Pharisees and the Herodians: "Then repay to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God."

Notice that our Lord Jesus affirms the legitimacy of civil authority, whose primary duty is to uphold the common good and to preserve human life and dignity. Yet He also clearly demonstrates that God, Who's the Creator of all things, deserves *His due*, and so guess what, *God ultimately supersedes Caesar*. Since God created *everything in existence, everything ultimately belongs to God!* And so all of the

temporal and earthly authority that Caesar has *ultimately comes from God*, Who is the Source and Origin of all temporal power and authority. Jesus Himself demonstrates this reality when He's being questioned by Pontius Pilate, who brags about his own power and authority saying, "Do you not speak to me? Do you not know that I have power to release you and I have power to crucify you?" Jesus answered [him], "You would have no power over me if it had not been given to you from above" (John 19:10-11).

So while Jesus affirms the legitimacy and necessity of the political state in His answer to the Pharisees and the Herodians, He implicitly affirms the supremacy and primacy of God, Who undoubtedly supersedes any earthly political power. Moreover, Christ's Church teaches that while legitimate civil authorities deserve honor, respect, and obedience for the sake of the rule of law and the preservation of the common good, the Magisterium clarifies, and this is expressed in the Catechism of the Catholic Church, that if the demands of civil authority run *contrary* to the natural moral law, human dignity, or a properly formed conscience, we the faithful have an *obligation* to refuse

obedience to any law that would make us complicit in sin and evil. We see this sacred duty of discipleship manifested by the Apostles in Acts 5:29, when they declare, “We must obey God rather than men.”

St. Thomas More was the great English Chancellor, saint, and martyr from the 16th Century who was beheaded because he refused to renounce his Catholic faith, endorse King Henry VIII’s unlawful marriage to Anne Boleyn, as well as support the King’s decision to separate from the Catholic Church and establish a new church, the Church of England, with himself the monarch as the Supreme Leader. And if you’ve never seen the 1966 movie, *A Man for All Seasons*, watch it – it’s an Oscar-winning classic! Before he was beheaded in London in 1535, St. Thomas More openly uttered these famous words to the spectators of his public execution: “I die the King’s good servant, but ***God’s first.***”

Brothers and sisters, as disciples of Christ, we need a hierarchy of identity. We are disciples of Christ and Catholics ***first, before*** we are Americans. We are disciples of Christ and Catholics ***first, before*** we are Republicans and Democrats! ***Discipleship must always supersede***

partisanship! In all things, *Christ and His Catholic Church must come first*, period. God deserves to come first in our life before anyone and anything else, and this most especially applies to our civic and political life. So when Jesus says, “Give to God what belongs to God,” *our whole life belongs to God!* We owe Him *everything*—all that we are!

Now as Catholics and disciples of Christ, our faith teaches us to be good and responsible citizens who diligently fulfill our civic duties. Indeed, it’s precisely *because we are Catholic* that we should love our country and strive to be good, faithful citizens who are active in the political process and are always seeking to make our country a better place for all, especially the weakest and most vulnerable among us.

As Catholics and disciples of Christ, we must always bring our faith to bear when it comes to our involvement in the public sphere. We don’t stop being Catholic disciples of Jesus when we leave the church and enter the voting booth. We don’t stop being Catholic disciples of Jesus when we enter the workplace, social situations, and the public sphere in general. There’s no on/off switch to our Catholic faith – rather

out of a pure love for God and our neighbor, our Catholic faith should define our entire life!

In his masterful book, *Render Unto Caesar: Serving the Nation by Living Our Catholic Beliefs in Political Life*, the Archbishop Emeritus of Philadelphia, Charles Chaput, makes the critical point that while our ***Catholic faith is always personal, it should never be private.*** This means that as Catholic disciples of Christ, we are called to live and share our faith with every fiber of our being, in public and private, when it's easy and when it's hard!

As disciples of Christ, we are always called to ***propose***, never ***to impose!*** And so while we obviously don't seek to build an "oppressive theocratic dictatorship that forces everyone to be Catholic," we ***do seek*** to build a more just, peaceful, compassionate, and humane society where ***every*** human life is cherished, from conception until natural death, and the equal dignity of ***every*** human person is upheld. This is the Gospel—and this is Christ's call to each of us as His disciples: to make Him present in the world through our entire life. So with the help of God's

grace, may we remain faithful to Christ and His Church at all times, and give God what He rightfully deserves: *our entire life*.