

29th Sunday of Ordinary Time

Preached October 22, 2017; St. Peter Catholic Church, The Dalles, Oregon

The classic definition of the virtue of justice is the “constant and perpetual will to render to each one what belongs to him.” (cf. St. Thomas Aquinas, ST IIaIIae Q58a1) The practice of justice requires quite a bit of thought; we need to think about just what is ‘owed’ to others in different ways. In some cases what is ‘owed’ is obvious, but in many cases it is not so obvious.

When unjust and malicious men, coming from opposite ends of the political spectrum, each seeking their own advantage, seek to entrap the Lord about paying taxes to Caesar, our Lord, in effect replies by telling them to do what is just and right: *Repay to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God.*

Jesus tells them to do what is just and right, repay to each one what is owed to him, but he also sets before our mind a distinction that would not have been clear in the minds of his hearers: what is owed to ‘Caesar’ or more generally to any human governing authority is different than what is owed to God, the Creator and Lord of all the universe. By setting the distinction between ‘Caesar’ and God before our minds, Jesus also invites and calls on us to reflect on what we owe to each.

By the way, of the two groups that sought to entrap Jesus in words, one, the Pharisees would have been more preoccupied with the question with what is owed to God and the other, the Herodians, would have been more preoccupied with what is owed to Caesar. The Pharisees indeed might have been inclined to deny Caesar any rights whatsoever, while the Herodians were probably pretty careless of the rights of God, whom they would have regarded as having little relevance to human life, to the ‘real’ world.

In any case, there is an immense realm of difficult and challenging questions that have emerged over the past 2,000 years as people have thought through and argued and fought about the different realms of what is owed to ‘Caesar’ and what is owed to God. What I want to focus on today is not the question of taxes, but of morality.

Governments make laws and while we have had the dictum ‘you can’t legislate morality’ drilled into our heads during the course of recent decades, it should be evident that the said dictum is nonsense and that human law has quite a powerful impact on moral thought and practice.

Consider this: ‘racism’ is widely regarded today as a moral evil and that has a lot to do with things like anti-discrimination laws. Anti-discrimination laws were established because ‘racism’ was deemed a moral evil and have since helped

inculcated the doctrine of the moral evil of racism. One thing should be clear: if 'racism' is a moral evil it is not government that makes it so.

On the other hand, the government has laws providing for 'no-fault' divorce. The intention behind those laws might not have been to teach that divorce is morally allowable, but that has, indeed, been the impact of those laws. Many people, including Catholics, think nothing of getting a divorce precisely because it is legal to do so. Further, they end up thinking that a civil divorce can actually dissolve a marriage.

So here is the question: What do we owe to 'Caesar' in the realm of morality? Must we look to Caesar as a moral teacher? Is Caesar the source of morality? Is human law the embodiment of morality? Or rather is Caesar himself beholden to a higher law?

I hope it is clear that the answer to the last question is 'yes, and that as a consequence, Caesar has no particular authority as a moral teacher except insofar as he respects the higher law of which he is not the author. Caesar's own laws have no moral force except insofar as they embody and harmonize with the higher law.

So from where does the higher law come?

Sometimes our modern day democratic 'Caesars' speak as though the higher law comes from the 'people', which reminds us of another famous false dictum, 'Vox populi, vox Dei' – The voice of the people is the voice of God. That dictum would turn the people (or the person who rules 'in the name of the people') into Caesar, and Caesar into God, thus conflating the distinction made by our Lord.

In the 8th century the monk Alcuin, one of the fathers of Christian education, wrote to the Emperor Charlemagne, "those people should not be listened to who keep saying the voice of the people is the voice of God, since the riotousness of the crowd is always very close to madness".

In the late 19th century Pope Leo XIII rejected as a false and destructive principle the one that "lays down that as all men are alike by race and nature, so in like manner all are equal in the control of their life; that each one is so far his own master as to be in no sense under the rule of any other individual; that each is free to think on every subject just as he may choose, and to do whatever he may like to do; that no man has any right to rule over other men. In a society grounded upon such maxims all government is nothing more nor less than the will of the people, and the people, being under the power of itself alone, is alone its own ruler. It does choose, nevertheless, some to whose charge it may commit itself, but in such wise that it makes over to them not the right so much as the business of governing, to be exercised, however, in its name." (Immortale Dei 24)

Actually, Pope Leo XIII might have been more accurate if he declared that the business of governing was committed to those who proved most skillful at

manipulating 'the will of the people'. Still he was not condemning elected government, but affirming that elected government derives its authority from God and not from the people. Both the people and the government are beholden to a higher law. The higher law, the moral law, of course comes from God himself, the Creator and Lord of all.

But how do we come to know that higher law?

In theory we are capable of knowing the natural moral law by the light of our own intelligence, reading, as it were, the law written into our very nature. In theory we are capable of knowing the natural moral law and in some measure we will always grasp its most basic elements, but sin obscures our grasp of the natural moral law. In a word we end up not knowing what we do not want to know; we do not want to know what we do not want to do.

Because sin darkens the mind, God revealed the foundational principles of the natural law anew in the ten commandments, but even that was not enough. The ten commandments do not come with the power to keep them. Jesus Christ needed to come to renew and deepen our understanding of God's will, of God's law, and provide us with the grace of the Holy Spirit that empowers us to do what he has commanded.

Still, when it comes to the higher law, it is not just a matter of each individual and God in their own conscience; there is another authority on this earth, apart from 'Caesar', and authority established by Jesus Christ. Before he left this earth Jesus told his Apostles, *All authority in heaven and earth has been given to me. Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, until the end of the age.* (Mt 28:18-20)

We cannot repay to God what belongs to God unless we listen to the teaching authority (or Magisterium) that he has established on this earth, not only with respect to the teaching of faith, but also in the teaching of morals. The making of just laws must respect true teaching.

So once again, we need to examine our own conscience on the matter. Do I let my conscience be formed by Caesar? Or by the authority of Christ's Church? Do I have a problem with the Church's moral teaching? If so, why? Have I really sought to learn and understand the teaching, or have I simply followed my own prejudice in the matter? Do I prize my own opinion or the opinion of the 'in-crowd' more than the teaching Christ has given us through his Church?

Finally, let us again turn to the Blessed Virgin Mary present at the wedding feast of Cana. Jesus worked his first miracle at that wedding feast, changing water into wine. A remarkable thing about that miracle is that it required human collaboration; the servants had to fill the jars with water at Jesus' command. They did so because they

listened to Mary who told them, *Do whatever he tells you.* (Jn 2:5) And among the things Jesus tells us he lets us know that whoever hears the teaching of his Church, hears him, and whoever rejects the teaching of his Church rejects him. (cf. Lk 10:16) So it must be, because the Church is his immaculate Bride.