

Fr. Nick Dant's Homily, Saint Matthew Catholic Church, Indianapolis
Twenty-Ninth Sunday in Ordinary Time, Oct. 17-18, 2020, Cycle A

Our Gospel passage from Matthew begins with the Pharisees going off to plot against Jesus, and how they might entrap him in his speech. In the parables we heard Jesus tell for the last three Sundays, Jesus criticized the Pharisees for the way they were living out the Mosaic Law, and they were in danger of losing the Kingdom of God. Angered by Jesus criticizing them publicly and exposing their hypocrisy, the Pharisees counter attack Jesus and try to entrap him into saying something condemnable and dangerous.

So, in collusion with the Herodians they sent off a deputation of their disciples to challenge Jesus. The group first offers disingenuous compliments to Jesus on his sincerity, ability to teach well, and his impartiality. After buttering Jesus up, then they set the trap: "Is it lawful to pay the census tax to Caesar or not?" Obviously the Pharisees and Herodians are attempting to force Jesus to choose between acting like a prophetic rebel – hero, or a heretical collaborator who honored the Roman Emperor. Jesus knows if he says people should not pay the tax, this would anger the Herodians, since Herod's power depended on his relationship to the Roman Emperor. If he says people should pay their tax, he would anger the Pharisees and zealots who opposed Roman occupation. Jesus refuses to fall into their trap, and once again calls them out on their hypocrisy. He says: "Show me the coin that pays the census tax." Someone hands Jesus a Roman denarius, and He says: "Whose image is this and whose inscription?" They could not fail but to answer, "Caesar's." By possessing such a coin in the first place Jesus had exposed them in the act of violating the Mosaic command against dealing with graven images. According to Jewish tradition that Roman coin bore an idolatrous image, since the inscription proclaimed the Emperor to be divine. The Pharisees were not so above collaborating with the Romans after all.

Nonetheless, Jesus makes no accusations against them; He simply and brilliantly says: "...Repay to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God." Jesus is saying: since this money is issued by Caesar, giving a portion back to Caesar is merely returning the money to its owner.

When Jesus says: "return to God what belongs to God," He is playing on the image metaphor. As the Roman coin is stamped with Caesar's image, we human beings are stamped in the image and likeness of God – as the Book of Genesis tells us. In fact all life comes from God. Jesus is asking: Is there anything in creation that does not belong to God? If one says there is, then what? We can only answer everything belongs to God – even Caesar!

If we are stamped with the image of God, and belong to God, then Jesus is reminding us that we need to devote our actions and our very lives to God. The challenge from Jesus is, how well are we doing? Or, do we fall into idolatry now and then by the way we live our lives?