Twenty-ninth Sunday in Ordinary Time (A)

Gospel text (*Mt* 22:15-21): The Pharisees went off and plotted how they might entrap Jesus in speech. They sent their disciples to him, with the Herodians, saying, "Teacher, we know that you are a truthful man and that you teach the way of God in accordance with the truth. And you are not concerned with anyone's opinion, for you do not regard a person's status. Tell us, then, what is your opinion: Is it lawful to pay the census tax to Caesar or not?" 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."

"Repay to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God"

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Today, the Gospel presents for our consideration a "famous" assertion from Jesus Christ: "repay to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God." (Mt 22:21).

We would not be able to properly grasp the meaning of this sentence without bearing in mind the context in which Jesus said it: "The Pharisees went off and plotted how they might entrap Jesus in speech" (Mt 22:15), but Jesus understood their malice. Thus, Jesus' reply is a calculated one. When they heard it, the Pharisees were surprised, as they did not expect it. If Jesus' answer would have clearly been against Caesar, they might had been able to denounce him; if, on the contrary, Jesus had been in favor of paying the taxes to Caesar, they would have left very pleased with their ruse. But, while not speaking against Caesar, Jesus has relativized his reply: we must return to God what is God's, and God is the Lord of even the powers of this world.

As every other ruler, Caesar cannot exert an arbitrary power. Just as the servants of the parable of the talents had to account to their Master for the use given to his money, Caesar's power derives from God. Thus, in St. John's Gospel, Jesus tells Pilate: "You would have no power over me if it had not been given to you from above" (Jn 19:11). Jesus does not want to appear as a political agitator. He simply put things right.

Today's Gospel reading has, at times, been understood to mean that the Church should not "interfere" in

political life, but should only mind its salvific mission and matters of faith. However, this interpretation is totally false. Dealing with God’s matters does not mean to mind only the worship of the Church, but to be also concerned about all people –God's children– and about man's justice. Pretending the Church does not move from the sacristy, while being deaf, blind and mute before the moral and human problems and abuses of our time, amounts to stealing from God what belongs to God. “The tolerance that admits God as it were as a private opinion but refuses him the public domain… is not tolerance but hypocrisy” (Benedict XVI).

Thoughts on Today's Gospel

- "The coin of Caesar is made of gold, on which his image is engraved; the coin of God is man, in whom the image of God is depicted; therefore, give your riches to Caesar and keep the conscience of your innocence for God." (St. Hilary of Poitiers)

- "The primary entrustment to God and hope in him do not imply an escape from reality, but rather the diligent rendering to God that which belongs to him." (Francis)

- "The citizen is obliged in conscience not to follow the directives of civil authorities when they are contrary to the demands of the moral order, to the fundamental rights of persons or the teachings of the Gospel" (Catechism of the Catholic Church, Nº 2242)