

Commentary on the Gospel for Sun, Oct 16th 2011



In our Gospel Jesus says to give "to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God." Those were challenging words in Jesus' day and they continue to challenge us.

In Jesus' time, government dominated religion. The Roman emperor was himself the "Pontifex Maximus" - the chief priest. In Israel the priesthood had become subservient to the state.** Jesus, by way of contrast, was his own man. When they questioned him about the census tax, he did not have a coin in his pocket. He had to ask them to show him a piece of currency. Noting the image of Caesar on the coin, he said, "Then repay to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God."

This pithy - and memorable - saying eventually transformed society. After the fall of the Roman Empire, there was much tension between church and state. Kings constantly attempted to dominate the Church - for example, by appointing bishops. The Church naturally fought back. A crucial moment came in 1215 when the Archbishop of Canterbury (Stephen Langton) gathered English barons to insist that the king respect certain basic rights. They drew up a document called the Great Charter. We know it by its Latin name - the Magna Carta. As every schoolchild knows, the Magna Carta launched the democratic experiment in England - a movement that later spread to America and other countries. If

you read the Magna Carta, you will notice that it begins with an affirmation of the legitimate autonomy of the Church.

Give to Caesar what belongs to him and to God what belongs to him. Yes, we must obey the just laws of our nation. At the same time we must give to God what belongs to him. And what belongs to God? Our consciences - that inner core of our being.

Today freedom of conscience is under attack in many areas and regulations. For instance for doctors and health workers regarding regulations that would mandate the coverage of contraception (including abortifacients) and sterilization in all private health insurance plans. According legal experts these regulations "could coerce church employers to sponsor and pay for services they oppose."

Those who defend these regulations say that they contain conscience protections. Unfortunately when you look more closely at the conscience clauses, they do not cover most Catholic institutions. I don't know about you, but if I were forced to choose between Caesar and God, I know who I would choose. When I die, Caesar will not judge me. God will.

We would be naive if we did not recognize that there are people in the different governments who see the Church in a weakened position - and they think that now is the time to bring the Church under state control.

For sure we are in weaker position than we were several decades ago. If we can learn anything from history, however, when the Church appears the weakest she often shows amazing resilience.

Whether we are strong or weak in the world's eyes, what matters is our fidelity to God. And, ironically, when are faithful to God that is when we do our best for our country.

Jesus has guaranteed that the Church will last till the end of time. He not gave that same guarantee to the United States of America, for instance. As Christians the best thing we can do for our country is to be good citizens of heaven. Give to Caesar what belongs to him and to God what belongs to him.

To sum up: we are asked by the Gospel to respond by putting God first. Our consciences belong to him.

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