



Contributed by Father Frank X. Reitzel, C.R.

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TWENTY-NINTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

October 19th, 2014

GATHERING TIME (10-15 minutes)

Introduction to the Word:

I was not prepared for this very simple question: "*Is God Catholic?*" I recall the young lad explaining that he had an argument with one of his buddies who was not Catholic. The young lad acknowledged that he believed God was *Catholic*, but that his Lutheran friend persisted otherwise. So what did I think? I was literally speechless, and tried to steer the conversation in a different direction. This same question and a few related questions are at the core of today's scriptural message: *Is God Catholic? To whom does God belong? Whose allegiance does God command?* These are the questions addressed in this Sunday's Scripture passages and will be the focus of our attention and prayerful reflections and discussion.

Today's world, not unlike that of the ancient past, boasts of many would-be gods. We see them in despotic rulers who have seized national leadership and rule as demagogues. We see them as powermongers, amassing huge corporations, determined to be "Number One" regardless of ethical or moral principles. We see them as real estate entrepreneurs, gobbling up prime properties and building the world's largest buildings as pseudo temples and monuments to the glory of their name. We see them as titans of technology, amassing incredible wealth and grasping for more. We see them as athletes, perceiving themselves as the best in the world and demanding unconscionable salaries to match. We see them in the powerful lobbyists, paid huge salaries to sway politicians and corporate CEO's to influence decisions primarily to serve their self-interests. In life's pursuit, whether we number ourselves among the ordinary or the elite, today's readings suggest we take a good look at the direction of our lives, to discern more clearly "our gods" and our God, and reflect on the manner of our response to each.

Warm up Activity:

The following warm up-activity is meant to stimulate a discussion on some basic questions related to our personal perceptions of God and our Catholic faith.

- 1) As a Catholic parent, your adolescent child or grandchild asks you the question I was asked (above): *Is God Catholic?* How would you respond?
- 2) Do you as a Catholic feel you have a greater chance of making it "to heaven" than your Lutheran neighbour? What were you taught? What do you presently believe? Share your thoughts.

The Table of the Word

Give to Caesar what is Caesar's; Give to God what is God's.

Most of us do not know or care whose image is on our currency. They are just images, after all and images don't mean much to us anymore. But in the time of Jesus, images were truthful things that said what they meant. An image stamped on something proclaimed that thing to be the legal property of the one who was imaged there.

The tax audit described in today's Gospel could've gone like this: Whose image is stamped on the coin? Caesar's. Then it must belong to Caesar. But whose image is stamped on *you*? God's. Then you must belong to God. *Part* of your possessions belong to Caesar but *all of you* belongs to God.

If you listen closely to Isaiah (first reading) you can almost hear him proclaiming aloud today's important theme for all to hear:

*"Make sure to pay full attention to your quests for gods,
and always remember, there is but **one God, one Lord of all.**"*

Leader: We owe our allegiance to no power but God alone.

Lord Jesus, you have power over all creation and all peoples,
Christ Jesus, you make your presence known in word and sacrament,
Lord Jesus, your name is above every other name,
Let us pray

Lord, have mercy.
Christ, have mercy.
Lord, have mercy.

*You alone, O God, are Lord, and there is no other.
 Formed in your image we bear the imprint of your face and your name.
 It is engraved in our hearts.*

*In the world loyal to other powers, may our lifestyle
 be governed by the standard of the Gospel in the currency of your kingdom.
 As we render to others the freedom of conscience that is their right, may we freely render to you
 the allegiance you alone deserve.*

This is our prayer in Jesus' name. Amen.

SCRIPTURE REFLECTION TIME

*(As Christians we believe that the **WORD** of God we hear proclaimed each Sunday is an empowering Word, and that God is present in the Word proclaimed. This is the Word that God wants us to hear today. The dynamic of the Small Christian Community, namely, reflecting on our life-story within the context of this Word, and sharing the insights of these reflections, is such that God's Spirit becomes present, and the gifts of the Spirit are experienced as empowering and life-giving. Because it is a privileged time it is incumbent on us in the small group to proclaim God's Word with due reverence, to be attentive to this proclamation, and respectful of the communal interaction. The facilitator has arranged for group members to proclaim the three readings.)*

FIRST READING (Isaiah 45: 1, 4–6)

Thus says the Lord to his anointed, to Cyrus, whose right hand I have grasped to subdue nations before him and strip kings of their robes, to open doors before him – and the gates shall not be closed:

“For the sake of my servant Jacob, and Israel my chosen, I call you by your name, I surname you, though you do not know me. I am the Lord, and there is no other; besides me there is no god.

I arm you, though you do not know me, so that all may know, from the rising of the sun and from the west, that there is no one besides me; I am the Lord, and there is no other.”

The Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

SECOND READING (1 Thessalonians 1:1–5ab)

From Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy, to the Church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace to you and peace.

We always give thanks to God for all of you and mention you in our prayers, constantly remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labour of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ. For we know, brothers and sisters beloved by God, that he has chosen you, because our message of the Gospel came to you not in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction.

The Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

GOSPEL (Matthew 22:15–21)

A reading from the holy Gospel according to Matthew. **Glory to you, O Lord.**

The Pharisees went and plotted to entrap Jesus in what he said. So they sent their disciples to him, along with the Herodians, saying, “Teacher, we know that you are sincere, and teach the way of God in accordance with truth, and show deference to no one; for you do not regard people with partiality. Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?”

But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, “Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites? Show me the coin used for the tax.” And they brought him a denarius.

Then he said to them, “Whose head is this, and whose title?” They answered, “The emperor’s.” Then he said to them, “Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s.”

The Gospel of the Lord. **Praise to you Lord Jesus Christ.**

(Allow two minutes for quiet and for a brief reflection)

COMMENTARY:

The first reading is an unusual passage of Scripture. Nowhere else in the Hebrew Scriptures is a Gentile king called to be God’s anointed one, i.e. “the messiah.” Cyrus II, a pagan, was known as *Cyrus the Great*, and founded the Persian Empire in the sixth century before Christ.

In 539 he conquered the Babylonians who, 50 years previous, had conquered the Jews and taken them into exile. This passage presents Cyrus as God’s instrument even though he knew neither this God nor his plans. In this role as God’s “chosen one,” Cyrus helped the exiled Jews return to their homeland, bringing the Babylonian Exile to an end. The point Isaiah makes is contrary to previous beliefs in *many* gods. In actual fact there is but one God who is Lord of the whole universe, and this God will use *anyone* to accomplish his divine plan and help build his Kingdom. This passage also serves as an effective background and context for today’s Gospel—a different view of the same lesson involving another pagan emperor some 600 years later.

In Matthew's Gospel, the Pharisees and Herodians were acutely aware of *taxes* as a sensitive issue when they approached Jesus with the question: "Is it lawful to pay the census tax to Caesar or not?" Jesus appears trapped: if he says "no," he is in trouble with the powerful Roman authorities; if he says "yes" he will be in disfavour with his compatriot Jews. Instead of choosing, however, Jesus asks for a denarius, a common Roman coin, and asks whose image it carries. Hearing that it is Caesar's he then says, "Then repay to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God."

This question about whose "image" the coin carries contains an allusion that most of us might miss, notes Dennis Hamm, S.J. (1998). Everyone, especially every Jew, knew that human beings were created in *the image of God*. Thus Jesus' response is not meant to be a clever dodge. It is a confrontation. "The world is not divided into one part for God, however large, and one part, however small, for Caesar. **All creation** is first of all under God's domain and rule, especially human beings who *as God's image*, have a special role in managing the goods of creation. In that same context, we humans are expected to work out the smaller question relating to the empire. Jesus' adversaries, therefore, in refusing to deal with Jesus' truth, are resisting the reign of God. They are failing to live out their roles as *bearers of God's image*."

Paul, in the second reading, affirms the "lesson" of the Gospel, above. His letter here is the earliest of the New Testament epistles, written 20 years after Jesus' death. Paul is most grateful to his fledgling Church community for responding so well and so quickly to his preaching and teaching. He is especially impressed with their openness to the Spirit and the manner they allowed the Spirit to touch their lives. He is gratified how his people have come to understand that "God's Word comes wrapped in flesh, and the testimony of their lives is the ground in which this meaning bears fruit." (*Preaching the Lectionary*, Reginald Fuller, 1984).

Do you really believe that God's stamp is embossed on each one of us? When God decided to have a life outside the Blessed Trinity, God became a human being. "You and I are imperfect humans, yet we are numbered, autographed, limited edition images of God. We glory in being adopted daughters and sons of God – that adoption is not just a legal fiction; it is authenticated by a divine DNA" (*ibid*)

Think about this: Try to realize what it means to be an authentic image of God, to be stamped as belonging to God, to be a personal, nontransferable possession of God. And when you have that reality firmly in your grasp, then consider what that implies, and whether you really want to accept that fact. Do you accept the fact that without the divine image engraved on you, you are worthless—devalued currency? "Do you render your whole being to God grudgingly, or gratefully?"

(Allow about 5 – 10 minutes for the participants to react to the **Commentary** to identify a newly discovered insight or idea.)

Questions for Reflection and Discussion:

1. (Isaiah) "I call you Cyrus by your name...I arm you."

- a) The pagan king Cyrus was not even aware that he was being used by God for a holy purpose. Can you think of recognized leaders of recent times either nationally or internationally, who may have been used by God in the same fashion as King Cyrus? Share your views and reasons for them.
- b) When have *you* been used in a surprising way to achieve some holy purpose? Share your stories.
- c) Under what circumstances have you felt a clash between your *faith* and your *civic loyalties*?

2. (Matthew) *Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's and to God the things that are God's.*"

If the notion of a god is defined by determining who has the most power, or authority, or status or money then ...

- a) Who would you include on a list of the gods who appear to "rule" today's cultural world?
- b) Which of these is especially troublesome to you?
- c) In terms of power which of these has the most influence for good? For evil?

3. (Thessalonians) "For we know, brothers and sisters beloved by God, that he has chosen you, because your message of the Gospel came to you not in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit."

- a) When have you been aware of being moved by God's Word, as was Paul?
- b) How significant is God's Word for you, as proclaimed and preached at Sunday's Mass?
- c) How significant is your small group experience in terms of hearing the Word proclaimed, and in terms of being moved by the Spirit? Speak to your own experience.
- d) Paul is forever inviting his community to share his own experience of the Good News. Are you inclined to share your own Good News? Why do we find this so difficult to do? Comment.

CARING-PRAYING TIME: *(15-20 minutes)*

(This time is reserved for quiet prayer as well as for an action-response to the communal reflections. The intent is to 'outreach' to the larger community. The facilitator should allow for a moderate pause between each of the numbered suggestions for reflection and action.)

1. Word for the Week:

*God's Word comes wrapped in flesh,
and the testimony of our lives will be
the ground in which the meaning bears fruit.*

2. Suggestion for the week:

- a. Find a way to bring an outsider into your circle of friends.
- b. Pray for the grace to recognize God working through legitimate authority.

3. Intercessions: (Response: **Lord, hear our prayer**)

Leader: With steadfast hope in our Lord Jesus Christ, let us pray to the Lord who calls us by name.

