

Father Rudy's Reflections

The Twenty-ninth Sunday in Ordinary Time

October 22, 2023

Render Unto Caesar?

My Brothers and Sisters in the Risen Lord,

Many of us have encountered, at one time or another, someone who seems to want to set us up to fail. In business this situation is called the Set-Up-To-Fail Syndrome, a managerial term that describes a dynamic between a supervisor and an employee wherein the manager begins to question everything the employee undertakes to show a lack of performance. This negative laser-focus on an employee creates a no-win situation, with no positive outcomes. It is a form of bullying. Whether at work or at home, a person who sets such a trap for another displays the dark traits of envy, dehumanization, and narcissism. It says everything about whom we are dealing with and what their intentions may be.

In Matthew's Gospel on this Twenty-ninth Sunday in Ordinary Time, Jesus faces the same situation when the Pharisees and Herodians attempt to entrap him with their cleverly devised question about Caesar's census tax that is imposed upon its citizens. The Pharisees and Herodians are baiting Jesus because they are out to get him. They begin with false flattery to smooth their way forward by speaking about Jesus's integrity, commitment to truth and equality. The question that is posed is a no-win situation, yet Jesus responds with a wonderful and thoughtful assertion. He does not answer with an either/or to this verbal trap but by a both/and: "Repay to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God." This statement is one of Jesus's greatest one-liners, as he concedes payment of the tax while subverting the reach of the emperor.

According to Bishop Robert Barron, Jesus's comeback points to two things: First, the Pharisees clearly display the meanness found in some who claim to be religious—a special type of hatred and cruel language extended to others based on their *own* theological beliefs. In the kingdom of heaven, however, there is no room for individuals with such venom. Barron says in doing this, "you are undermining the God you are claiming to proclaim." And we, who might be on the other end of such comments, should not play the game or cooperate. Our Christianity does not allow us to destroy other people in the name of religion.

Second, and perhaps most importantly, what Jesus imparts in this clever response is a nuanced fact of Christianity. Yes, there is a distinction between church and state, and governments do have a legitimate sphere of operations to make laws and create order for the society. But as Christians we believe God is absolute, and all things belong to him. We do not belong to anyone else or even to ourselves. The Pharisees, Caesar, society—all of it—are part of God's handiwork. We can never divide our loyalty, and we must maintain our integrity in all we do. Navigating through this modern world may be a challenge requiring great negotiation and commitment, but whatever brings a wholeness to our lives in faith, we must embrace and share with others. *They will know we are Christians by our love.* . .

Yours in Christ,

Fr. Rudy