

On the day of my priestly ordination Mark, a good friend from high school, gave me a unique gift. He had purchased from a gallery in New York an ancient bronze coin from the time of the Roman Emperor Constantine the Great – 1,700 years old. The inscriptions have been worn off, but the coin retains a silhouette of the emperor on it. Included with the coin was a brief note from Mark, “Kurt, give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar, and to God what belongs to God.” Good words of advice for a new priest – or any Christian for that matter.

We heard these words in our Gospel today. Despite their smooth words of flattery, the Pharisees and Herodians – powerful factions within Judaism under the Romans – are trying to put Jesus on the horns of a dilemma. If Jesus says it is lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, He will be implicated in the Roman occupation of the Jewish homeland. This might undermine Jesus’ popularity. But if Jesus says it is NOT lawful to pay the Roman tax, He becomes a rebel, and

liable for execution. Either way this troublesome young Rabbi is out of the way.

Jesus slips out of the trap, but His answer is not merely a clever trick. He really does mean that Jews can cooperate with the foreign government in this earthly matter of taxation. His answer points to different spheres in life. The Church and Caesar (or any government) – have different roles. The state is owed support for its necessary tasks. But at the same time the Church is called to proclaim and champion the common good and the God-given dignity of all people in the face of any violation by the state of God's higher law.

This passage has always been important in the development of Catholicism's political theology and why, despite some overblown rhetoric, true theocracy, actual rule by the Church and clerics has not been a significant part of Western History – as opposed to say, Islamic history where the Quran explicitly calls for the union of civil and religious authority. Iran really is a theocracy.

But as important as this half of Jesus' answer is – “repay to Caesar what belongs to Caesar” – that is not why Mark sent me that particular ordination gift. When reading these words of Christ, we can concentrate too much on the political issues at the heart of the Pharisees' question, and glide over the second half of the Savior's answer. That is, His call to “repay to God what belongs to God.” What does it mean to repay God? In what coinage is the tax of His Kingdom paid?

“Whose image is this?” Notice how Jesus deliberately asked the Pharisee to see the Roman coin. He wants to display, as a visual aid, Caesar's image stamped upon the coin.

Similarly, to “repay God what belongs to God” we must find where God's image, not Caesar's, is located. And where we will find that image, as Genesis 1:26 tells us, is in human beings. We are made in the image and likeness of God. As Constantine the Great's image was stamped upon that Roman coin, so human reason,

dignity, beauty, moral depth, immortality – are the reflected image of God, King of king and Lord of lords, stamped upon each of our souls.

What Jesus wants from us, therefore, as support for His Kingdom of Heaven, is other holy souls. And we offer such souls to God through our own love for them by helping them to know and love Jesus. That is why Jesus commissioned us to go and make Disciples of all nations.

Today, when we're told by Christ to repay to God what is His, let us ask ourselves, "Have I ever brought anyone closer to Jesus by my words, actions, example, teaching, charity?" Have I even tried to repay Jesus for the love He has shown me by increasing His Kingdom? Do I even recognize that I owe Him?

As Catholics, we supposedly believe that those who don't know Jesus are lost sheep in need of rescue. But is there any sense of urgency to our faith to bring those lost sheep home? Does the thought even cross our minds? A fancy name for this is

‘evangelizing,’ but it simply means sharing what we have found in Jesus – with other people.

A couple of weeks ago I preached about stewardship of time and talent. How the great step in growing in discipleship is going from focusing purely on my own spiritual life – to a compassionate concern for the spiritual good of other people. How are we doing with that as a parish? I think we could improve - a lot. What if that is one of the areas we concentrate on as we form initiatives for our new parish family – inviting our neighbors to Christ here? Within the year we will be engaging in something called “Evangelical Catholic.” Stay tuned.

But it’s not just the parish. How are each of us doing as disciples? Ask yourself, am I someone who has ever repaid God for His blessings in my life with new members of the body of Christ? I know I could do much better.

And it's not only non-Catholics who need evangelizing. How many of us come to mass regularly – are “practicing Catholics,” but do not have Jesus at the center of our lives? As a parish, we have activities and programs, but how many result in our growing in a relationship with Jesus? There is work to do.

At our Judgement, God will show us an image of whom He intended each of us to be – the potential saint inside us if we had followed Him fervently – side by side with the person we actually became. He will show me how I could have changed the stories of the people Jesus had intended me to evangelize and help – but didn't. For me, that is a very uncomfortable thought.

When my friend gave me that coin, that pointed reminder, as an ordination gift he was calling me to just such a priest. But at our baptism we were all called to the same mission. How is that going for you?