

Twenty-Ninth Sunday in Ordinary Time – Cycle A
Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception – October 22, 2017
Reverend Robert W. Marshall, Jr., Parochial Administrator

Long before their name became associated with a Las Vegas casino or became famous for a salad, the Caesars were a typical Roman family – except, of course, that they were dictators. When, in his will, Julius Caesar posthumously adopted his great-nephew Octavian as his son and heir, he unknowingly turned his family name into a title used by Roman emperors for more than four hundred years. Octavian, whom history remembers as Caesar Augustus, abolished the Roman republic and installed himself as an absolute ruler. His step-son and heir, Tiberius Caesar, continued the brutal tradition of holding on to power by any means necessary – and some of the means deemed necessary included eliminating family members who might challenge you for the throne. At any Caesar family gathering, everyone would have been wise to bring their own food taster.

When Jesus walked the roads of Galilee and Judea, he was travelling in land occupied by the empire over which Tiberius Caesar ruled. The residents of Galilee and Judea did not “join” the empire as did the Tennessee territory when it petitioned for statehood. No, Rome conquered the land of the Middle East by force and it took many occupying forces, and the cooperation of the Judean puppet tetrarch Herod Antipas, to maintain that power. So when, in our gospel today the Jews of strict observance – the Pharisees – brought along those loyal to Herod Antipas (and therefore to Caesar himself) to question Jesus, their motives were not exactly pure. They hoped to trap him between two difficult positions. Either Jesus would destroy his credibility among the oppressed people of Galilee and Judea by endorsing the unfair taxation imposed by Caesar and Herod, or he would put a price on his head by defying those in power. Rather than falling into their trap, Jesus made a point of his own. He asked for and received a Roman coin – a *denarius* – which bore the image of Tiberius and was inscribed, “Tiberius Caesar, son of the divine Augustus, Pontifex Maximus – or high priest of the Roman religion.” Jesus distinguished these coins of the empire – these objects of artificial value bearing Caesar’s image from that which belongs to God. He told those assembled to repay to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God. It was a remarkably clever way of avoiding the trap the Pharisees and the Herodians had set for him, but we have missed the point Jesus was trying to make if we dismiss this exchange as merely clever. In this passage, Jesus reveals some important truths.

First, Jesus recognized that, as people of faith, we have to live and work in the society in which we find ourselves. We may not like it, we may work to change it, but we must live in it. In his time, that meant a recognition of the raw power of the Roman empire. Jesus wasn’t endorsing Tiberius Caesar or Herod Antipas or any of those who kept them in power. He was merely being realistic – the things of this world pass away, so why spend so much time and effort fighting over what will not last. Why put your life on the line over money – over the things that belong to this world and those who would rule it? God is what’s important. That’s Jesus’ second point. Repay to God what belongs to God. So what belongs to God? Everything that we have and everything that we are. Our

heart, our soul, our mind – everything that is truly important is God’s gift. It is God whom we should serve.

Now this passage has been interpreted in many ways over the years. It has been used to endorse a separation of church and state – which is a fair interpretation, as far as it goes. Jesus does emphasize the distinction between earthly power and God’s power, between this world and the next. But there is an important distinction between the government of Jesus’ day and the government under which we live. In Jesus’ time, there wasn’t a lot of political activism – Caesar didn’t care. He ruled absolutely and the opinions of his subjects did not concern him. In this country, we are Caesar. Obviously, we are not brutal dictators, but we are Caesar in that power resides with us – collectively. The coin Jesus held up touted Tiberius Caesar’s power. Our coins proclaim, “In God We Trust.” Therefore, we have a responsibility to use the power of citizenship wisely, in harmony with the common good, always recognizing the limitations of government, but also conscious of its ability to foster peace and justice, to promote and respect the dignity of each human person, to do collectively what we cannot do individually. Rather than repaying Caesar, we have a responsibility to repay to one another – and to the global community – for the many blessings of liberty that we enjoy. But we will only be able to do this well if we listen to that second part of Jesus’ statement. We will only be able to exercise our responsibilities as citizens if we repay to God what belongs to God. We can be good citizens only if we are faithful to the Word of God. We do that, of course, first and foremost, by being people of prayer. We cannot hope to effect change in our society without being conformed to Christ, without humbly asking for his guidance in our lives and in the life of our nation. And being people of prayer does not mean just saying a few pre-scripted words and telling God what to do – here’s my plan for America, God, I trust you’ll agree. No, true prayer is a conversation with God – actually more listening on our part than talking. Listening by humbly reading and meditating on the Word of God in Sacred Scripture. Listening by spending time in silence before the Lord – in Eucharistic Adoration, for example. Listening by setting aside our personal preferences and allowing God to speak directly to our hearts.

And having prayed, having listened to the Lord, we are challenged to educate ourselves and become politically active – you more so than me. Last year, and in the many years before, candidates were elected, and proposals were approved or defeated by the votes of only a fraction of our fellow citizens. The majority do not bother to vote at all. In a representative democracy such as ours, where we stand in the place of Caesar, everyone – and especially every Christian – has a responsibility to take our faith to the polls and to the halls of government. We have a particular responsibility to ensure that the government does not infringe upon our religious liberty and permits us the free exercise of our entire faith – not just the freedom to gather for worship as long as we do so on private property. We can hope and work for a better society and wish that our fellow Caesars, our fellow citizens had vibrant prayer lives. More importantly, we can inspire them to be faithful citizens by our example of faith and the seriousness with which we approach the issues of our time. The work of evangelization must begin in each of us and extend to all of our fellow Caesars.