

## Twenty-ninth Sunday in Ordinary Time

There are people inside and outside the Church who think that Christ did not give the Church a mandate to speak about political matters. They regularly quote the Gospel we have just heard to support their case. But if one knows and understands the context and meaning within which this text was written it provides no ammunition for those who want the Church to stay indoors, reflect on things “spiritual,” preach the eternal verities, and sing hymns more ancient than modern.

In Jesus’ day, we know that some people thought he was a Zealot. Zealots were a well-organized group who agitated for the end of the Roman occupation of Israel. One of the things Zealots did was withhold paying the Roman taxes. We can see why some people thought Jesus may have been a Zealot. He took the part of the poor, the sick, women, and those who lived on the fringes of society. He attacked the religious authorities of his day and certainly stirred up trouble in many places he went. On the other hand he rejected violence, taught his followers to pray for their enemies and to return good for evil. Jesus showed us that the justice and equality God longs to see in the world comes from a community which is converted by love, not by weapons, fear or revenge. Jesus was no Zealot.

Rather than undermine civil authority, however, Jesus, in this passage, supports it. But he does more. "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's" is followed by "And give to God, what is God's," which encompasses all the Caesars of this world, all civil authorities and states. The sense that we as the People of God can split off our obligations to the Gospel from the State is as false as it's dangerous.

We only have to think of some of the darkest chapters last century to see what happens when good, church-going people, like us, do not put their Sunday devotion in touch with their Monday politics. Evil can reign.

Christian leaders, who are charged to proclaim and defend the Gospel, are obliged to use whatever forum necessary to declare that God’s personal love encompasses everyone and everything under heaven. As the prophet Isaiah reminds us today, God calls each one of us by name.

At times we may not agree with our religious leaders; we may think them ill informed; we may even think they have overstepped the mark. If this is the case we should tell them, enable them to consider other perspectives and to broaden the basis upon which they make their judgments. But we should never be seduced by those who want the Church sidelined from the mainstream of the debates that shape the way we live, the values we share, the laws we draft and the priorities we draw up for our human community.

If the Church shows disinterest in any of this, it is untrue to the very things for which Jesus lived, died and was raised from the dead. By all means we should give to Caesar all that Caesar is justly entitled to have for the sake of the common good. A higher allegiance, however, goes to God, who will call all Caesars to account for what they have done and what they failed to do. And we might be asked to explain how we let them get away with it in the first place.

Fr. Eric T. Carpine, ofm