

“Give therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s.” (Mt 22:21)

Is there anything that does not belong to God?

The Pharisees and Herodians asked Jesus, “Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?” A census tax implied that, if one were a citizen, one owed the money to the emperor. The Jews believed that they had only one Lord and Ruler and that was their God. Taxes, or any form of submission, should be made to Yahweh alone. Paying taxes to the emperor reminded God’s people of living under the heel of a foreign power. Jesus did not go by the flattery words of Pharisees and Herodians but knew their malice. If He said, it’s lawful to pay the taxes to the emperor, He will go against the sentiment of the Jews who hated Roman emperor. And if He said, it’s not lawful, the Herodians will report to the emperor about an uprising revolt to his rule and reign.

The Pharisees and Herodians presented the ‘Yes or No’ option, trying to cause a dilemma for Jesus but Jesus did not enter into controversy and asked them to show Him a coin used for paying tax. Then, He further said to them, “Whose head is this, and whose title?” They answered Caesar’s. A Roman coin had on one side the image of the emperor with the inscription “Tiberius Caesar, Son of the Divine Augustus” and on the other side his title “Pontifex Maximus” (high priest). Thus, Caesar claimed not only political sovereignty but also Divine attributes which again is not liked by the Jews because God alone is divine and not Caesar, who is just a mere creature. By having the possession of a Roman coin, the Pharisees or Herodians principally approve of paying tax, whereas in practice they were trying to show their dislike. Jesus calls them ‘hypocrites’ for that reason.

Jesus says, “Give therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s.” What does it mean? For Jesus, both the political and religious obligations can be legitimately met. Paying taxes is not a compromise of one’s duties toward God, nor does serving God exempt one from supporting the civil government. If a Roman coin bears the image of Caesar, it belongs to him, give it to him as simple as that. But what is it that belongs to God? It is the human person who bears the image of the living God (Gen 1:26-27). God breathed into us His very life, created us in His image and likeness, so we belong to him. Our life and everything we have belong to him, except sin. Yes, read it right, everything belongs to God, except sin that exclusively is our possession. Our highest priority and obligation in life is to God. By birth we are citizens of a country, by baptism we are citizens of heaven. We have obligations toward both. Caesar’s authority and space are limited and that also he holds it under God and is responsible for proper governance for the good of all. But when Caesar oversteps the mark and puts itself in place of God, Christians are in the last resort absolved from obedience. We must give to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s and not the things that are God’s.

In the context of a world in crisis, Pope Francis is always asked to take sides. But he says there are not two sides but only one and that is of Peace. We can further say, there are not two ways but only one, that is the way of God who is Jesus Christ, who is Love. Love for God and neighbor has to come for our heart and therefore give to God our hearts, so that He can dwell in and produce love in abundance for all. In times of challenges and contradictions that our world and its authority propose, let us remember to give our obedience and even be ready to give our life to God so that we may not be enslaved by sin that leads us away from eternal life in heaven.