

Commentary to the 29th Sunday in Ordinary Time – Year A –

Engaged in the world, but not of the world

Introduction



Man does not live alone. He is part of a civilized society and should establish collaborative relationships with others. From the need to organize the coexistence comes the need to determine the rights and duties, to give institutions, to set ways and forms to contribute to the common good. It is not easy to determine what is right: Diverse interests come into play; various objectives to achieve are envisaged. There are those who claim favors, demand privileges, and inevitable tensions arise.

To further complicate the problem, there are relations between the state system and religious institutions with their principles, norms, customs, traditions, indispensable claims. Many, feeling subjects of two competing powers—which often intrude each other, exchanging mutual accusations of pitch invasions—have a torn conscience. To resolve the conflict, there are those who choose fanatical and fundamentalist positions and attempt to impose their convictions. Those who renounce a

confrontation from which they fear coming out defeated and place themselves on the margins.

In the famous Letter to Diognetus, composed around the middle of the second century A.D., wise and timeless principles are suggested: “Christians neither by country, nor language, nor customs are distinguished from other people. Living in Greek and barbarian cities, as it happened, each one must adapt himself to the customs of the place, in clothing, food, and rest. They witness to a way of wonderful and undoubtedly paradoxical social life. They live in their homeland, but as strangers; they participate in everything as citizens and detached from all things as foreigners. Every foreign country is their fatherland, and every fatherland is foreign. They marry like everyone else and have children, but do not throw newborn babies. They share their meals, but not the bed. They dwell in the land, but they have their citizenship in heaven. They obey the established laws and their way of life surpasses the laws. To put it short, as the soul is in the body, so are Christians in the world” (Letter to Diognetus, The Manners of the Christians V, VI, 1).

To internalize the message, we repeat:

“Christians shine as lights in the world: exemplary citizens, consistent with their beliefs, respecting those of others.”

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First Reading: Isaiah 45:1,4-6

For the last thirty years, the Israelites were in Babylon when a prophet arose among them. He remained anonymous but, by the oracles that his disciples have collected and entered in the book of Isaiah, his eminent personality shines through. He was a poet, one of the finest that Israel ever had, a sensitive man, educated and attentive to the social and political upheavals involving his people. Brilliant theologian, he was able to discern the plan of salvation of God beyond what others thought were simple events, alliances, diplomatic intrigues, military campaigns.

In today’s passage, he reveals what the Lord is about to do on behalf of his people: Babylon, the bloody, the damned, is powerful, but not for long, because a new star arose in the horizon. He is the Persian king Cyrus the skillful leader who with a series of victorious expeditions conquers and subjects, one after the other, all the kingdoms of Asia Minor and the Orient. He finally directs against Babylon where he meets no resistance and enters triumphantly. Undisputed ruler of the world, he issues an edict in which he presents himself as the savior of the oppressed, the defender of the weak, the pious man God uses to accomplish his plans. He orders the release of all the exiled. If they so desire, they can return to the land of their fathers, practice their religion, or rather, he himself wants to contribute to the reconstruction of places of worship destroyed by the soldiers of Babylon (Ezra 1:1-4).

After this historical introduction, it is easy to understand today’s reading, where the Lord—through the mouth of this prophet—presents Cyrus as the Chosen One: “I have taken you by the right hand to subdue nations before you, to open the gateways before you so that they will be closed no more” (v. 1).

Then, as it happens in the oracles of the enthronement of a king (Ps 2:10), God speaks directly to the new sovereign: "I have called you by your name, and given you your mission, although you do not know me" (vv. 4-5).

God gave a unique title to Cyrus: anointed. [In Hebrew, *mashiah*, from which the word "Messiah" is derived; from its Greek translation, *Christos*, we have the title "Christ." Applied to kings, "anointed" originally referred only to those of Israel, but it is here given to Cyrus because he is the agent of the Lord.] The Lord has given him more: "My shepherd and he goes to fulfill my will" (Is 44:28); "He will rebuild my city. He will send my exiles home." He whom "I spurred for justice" and before him "I will level all ways" (Is 45:13). These expressions almost suppose that Cyrus is deemed by the prophet as the awaited savior, the Messiah, the king who "reigns from sea to sea and from the River to the ends of the earth" (Ps 72:8).

He was not. He was merely the instrument of the Lord to liberate the people from the bondage of Babylon, and—this is the surprise—he completed this work of salvation without knowing it. Note the insistence on this fact: "Although you do not know me ... even if you do not know me" (vv. 4,5). The confirmation comes from the famous Cylinder of Cyrus, where the stunning victories of this king are not attributed to the Lord, but to the protection of the god Marduk. "Marduk cast his eyes on all the countries looking for one who will govern with integrity. He spoke the name of Cyrus so that he may dominate the world. Marduk, the great god, was pleased with him and sat beside him, as a true friend." Cyrus was believed to be the elect of the Babylonians' god. He was instead led by the hand of Israel's God, the one God, one Lord, "and there is no other" (v. 6).

The prophet's words are an invitation to watch the events and history of the world through new eyes: people and nations are stirred, are driven by interests and passions, have outbursts of generosity and selfish withdrawals, but the Lord leads them and everything to enter into his plan of salvation. Even the atheists and unbelievers often have given and continue to give an important contribution to the purification of faith and religion and the liberation of man. Without knowing they were involved in the projects of God.

Second Reading: 1 Thessalonians 1:1-5b

Today and for the next four Sundays, passages of the First Letter to the Thessalonians will be read.

Thessalonica was a rich commercial metropolis that stood in the inner part of the Gulf of Thessaloniki. It was named after the sister of Alexander the Great, wife of the general Cassander, founder of the city. It was protected by massive walls which, starting from the sea, surrounding the hill on which stood the acropolis. The geographer Strabo describes it as "populous, carefree and open to all novelties, both good and bad." Like all port cities, it was not a model of morality: prostitutes, vagrants, idle people, charlatans roamed the street, but it was also inhabited by honest and hardworking people.

Paul arrived there in 50 A.D. and, as was his custom, he announced Christ first of all to the Jews who gathered in the synagogue on the sabbath day. The results were rather disappointing; few believed his preaching. He had greater success when he preached to the Gentiles who adhered to faith in considerable numbers, among them also quite a few noble women (Acts 17:1-9).

After a few weeks, a turmoil caused by the Jews forced him to abandon the city hastily, before being able to explain to his disciples the central themes of faith; hence the belief that he had left behind a rather fragile community.

Even the successive stages of his journey were marked by difficulties and failures. At the Areopagus in Athens, he tried the approach with the intellectuals of Greece, but the experience was disappointing: “When they heard Paul speak of a resurrection from death, some made fun of him, while others said, ‘We must hear you on this topic some other time.’ But some joined him and became believers” (Acts 17:32-34).

From Athens, he came to Corinth, the city with two harbors, known around the world for the dissolute life of its inhabitants and therefore seemingly less suitable soil for the seed of the gospel. Paul was discouraged, and he decided to talk about Christ in the synagogue only on Saturday and spend the rest of the week to his own profession as a manufacturer of tents (Acts 18:1-4).

One day Silas and Timothy, companions of apostolic labors, came to Thessalonica. They brought back amazing and unexpected news. The Thessalonian community had developed, grown lush and had become a model of faith and practice of fraternal charity. They faced persecution, harassment, intimidation of non-believers. They enjoyed the esteem of the pagans for the integral life that the baptized were leading. All retained a nostalgic remembrance of Paul. They were immensely grateful to him because through him they had been introduced to the faith and consigned to Christ. They were eagerly awaiting his visit ...

Startled, almost in disbelief, Paul had been listening to his friends. He took courage and decided to fully devote himself again to the proclamation of the gospel (Acts 18:5). Still excited, he wrote, also in the name of Silas and Timothy, a letter to the Thessalonians.

That’s how the first book of the New Testament was born. We are in the year 51 A.D. In the first five verses taken from today’s reading, Paul confesses the joy he feels every time he thinks of the Christians in Thessalonica. In fact, he has heard that their community is well-grounded in faith, in hope and in charity (v. 3).

These three virtues are characterized and linked. The work of faith, first of all: the Thessalonians didn’t limit themselves to accepting and repeating some abstract formulas but have translated their faith into concrete actions, in diligent charity, in verifiable actions by all. Their hope is unwavering; it is not diminishing in the face of any difficulty and trial, not even before the danger of losing their lives.

In the spiritual progress made by the community of Thessalonica, Paul sees the work of God and the power of the Spirit. He was discouraged because he had found his weakness but now rejoices, verifying how God manages to carry through his works.

Gospel: Matthew 22:15-21

The passage’s final sentence is one of the most famous, but also the most enigmatic. It is not easy to establish the meaning, so it is not always mentioned apropos. It is sometimes used by those in power to

ask the church hierarchy not to meddle in political affairs. Other times these are the ones reminding the rulers to assert its right to defend and proclaim the values that flow from the gospel. It was used, however, by those who supported the papal hierarchy and advocated the caesaropapism against those who defended the secular state and dreamed of subjecting it to the religious power, from those who sacralized the institutions and justified the temporal power of the church. Someone, more simply, uses it as an invitation to give everyone what they deserve.

To understand the phrase, there is a need to place it in the context of the dialogue from where it came from.

The Emperor of Rome demanded of each of his subjects who had attained the age of fourteen (man), twelve (woman) and up to sixty-five years, the annual monetary payment to the treasury. It was the *tributum capitis* or *testatico* for which the heinous censuses were done often provoking popular uprisings (Lk 2:1-5; Acts 5:37). Counting the people who belonged to God was equivalent, for the pious Israelite, to shield one from the authority of the Lord and to enslave one to a human power. For this reason, after the census, David felt his heart beat and said, “I have sinned greatly in what I have done; I have acted foolishly” (2 S 24:10).

One day the Pharisees, accompanied by supporters of Herod, present themselves to Jesus. In a very respectful way, having recognized his love for the truth and his rejection of compromise, ask him a tricky question: “Master, we know that you are an honest man and truly teach God’s way. You are not influenced by others nor are you afraid of anyone. So tell us what you think: is it against the Law to pay taxes to Caesar or not?” (vv. 16-17).

This alliance between the Pharisees and Herodians is strange. The first thought it impious to support the Roman occupation; the latter was instead supporters of Herod Antipas, the puppet with no personality, dominated by Emperor Tiberius, and they were collaborators. We find them allied against Jesus because he annoyed both. He was loyal and refused all forms of hypocrisy.

Their question is worded in such a way as to make it impossible for any loophole: If one is against the payment of taxes, he could be denounced to the Roman authorities as a subversive. (In fact, according to Lk 23:2, before Pilate they accused him of inciting the people not to pay taxes to Caesar). If he is in favor, he attracts the antipathy of the people who hate the Roman colonizers.

All taxes are reluctantly paid anywhere but, to make the tribute odious, a religious cause was added in Palestine. The money required had on one side a representation of the Emperor of Rome and the inscription: “Tiberius Caesar, august son of the divine Augustus” and on the back the title “Supreme Pontiff” with the image of a seated woman, a symbol of peace, perhaps Livia, the mother of Tiberius. In 1960 about thirty pieces of these coins were found on Mount Carmel.

It is known that the Israelites disliked human images, prohibited by their law. Using the money of Tiberius meant to give one’s consent to a form of idolatry. Jesus is aware of the pitfall that they have laid for him. He does not avoid the question. As he usually does, he skillfully leads the interlocutors at the root of the problem.

He wants them first to show him the money. They naively reach out under the tunic where they

usually hide the money (clothes at that time had no pockets) and they present it to him. They do not realize that Jesus is playing with them: first, he asks for the money. It means that he does not possess it (for he does not even have a stone to lay his head; Mt 8:20), and if they pull it out, it means that they use it without any problem. They receive it for their services, and with it, they buy the products at the market. What's more, the dispute takes place in the precincts of the temple (Mt 21:23), and in the holy place, and they do not bother to profane it by showing that image. They have scruples only when they have to pay taxes.

After looking at the money Jesus asks, "Whose image is this?" "Caesar's," they say. "So—he concludes—give to Caesar what is Caesar's and give to God what is God's" (v. 21).

The first message that Jesus wants to give is clear: it is a moral duty as well as civil to contribute to the common good with the payment of tribute. There is no reason that justifies tax evasion or theft of state assets. Whatever the policy and economic choice of the government, the disciple of Christ is called to be an honest and exemplary citizen. He is actively engaged in building a just society and shuns the subterfuge. He makes political choices that favor the weakest, not those that safeguard their own interests.

Writing to the Romans, Paul restates in more explicit terms the directive of the Master. We are at the beginning of Nero's reign—the Emperor is in his twenties and for three years he initially governs in a lenient and moderate way. Here's what the Apostle recommends to the Christians in the capital: "Let every one be subject to no authority that does not come from God, and the offices have been established by God. Whoever, therefore, resists authority goes against a decree of God and those who resist deserve to be condemned. It is necessary to obey not through fear but as a matter of conscience. In the same way, you must pay taxes and the collectors are God's officials. Pay to all what is due them, to whomever you owe contributions, make a contribution; to whom taxes are due, pay taxes; to whom respect is due, give respect" (Rom 13:1-7).

Jesus' answer, however, is not limited to state the duty to contribute to the common good with the payment of taxes. He adds: "Give to God what is God's."

The verb he uses more precisely means "to return." Looking to the present, therefore, he says, "Give back to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and return to God what is God's." They are not only holding back the money that should be handed over to the emperor but they also illegally and unjustly seized, a property of God. They must give it back right away because he claims it; it is his.

Tertullian already in 200 A.D. realized that he was the man that was handed back to God. Creating him, in fact, he had said: "Let us make man in our image, to our likeness. So God created man in his image, in the image of God he created him" (Gen 1:26-27).

If the coin had to be "returned" to Caesar because on it was stamped the face of his master, man must be "returned" to God. Man is the only creature on whom the face of God is imprinted. He is sacred and no one can take him as his own. Those who make them their own (enslave, oppress, exploit, dominate, use the, as an object...) should immediately return him to his Lord.

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