

Father O'Connor's Homily for 18 October 2026
Twenty-Ninth Ordinary Sunday – A

Isaiah 45: 1, 4-6
1 Thessalonians 1: 1-5b
Matthew 22: 15-21

Over the past three weekends we have seen Jesus in the Gospels, as it were, on the attack. He spoke three parables in which He plainly indicted the Jewish leaders.

Three Sundays ago, in the parable of the two sons, “The Better of Two Bad Boys,” the Jewish leaders are the son who, after he said that he would, did not do his father’s will that he go and work in the vineyard [Matthew 21: 28-32]. Two Sundays ago, in the parable of the landowner who leased his vineyard, the leaders are the wicked tenants who killed the landowner’s son [Matthew 21: 33-43]. Last Sunday, in the parable of the king’s wedding feast, they are the invited guests who were rude no-shows [Matthew 22: 1-14].

In today’s Gospel, we see the Jewish leaders now launching their own counter-attack. And they do so by directing a carefully-crafted question at Jesus, which they hypocritically and maliciously ask Him in public. Their aim is to make Jesus discredit Himself by His own words in the presence of the people.

Remember that Palestine was an occupied country and the Jews were subject to the Roman Empire. So their question for Jesus was, “Is it lawful to pay the census tax to Caesar or not?”

This question posed a real dilemma. If Jesus said that it was unlawful to pay the tax, they would promptly report Him to the Roman government officials as a revolutionary, and Jesus’ arrest would certainly follow.

If Jesus said that it was lawful to pay the tax, He would stand discredited in the eyes of many of the people. Not only did the people resent the tax – as many people today resent taxation – but for a Jew, God was the only king. Their nation was a theocracy. To pay tax to a foreign king was to insult God.

Whichever way Jesus might answer – or so His questioners thought – He would lay Himself in the jaws of their trap.

The maliciousness of their attack is shown by the Pharisees and the Herodians – who were bitter opponents – joining forces. The supremely orthodox Pharisees resented the payment of taxes to a foreign king. The Herodians, as their name indicates, were the party of Herod, the king of Galilee, who owed his power to the Romans. The Pharisees and the Herodians put aside their huge differences

for the moment and were joined in their common hatred of Jesus and their common desire to eliminate Him.

Here is another factor. Matthew wrote his Gospel account between A.D. 80-90. The Temple in Jerusalem had been destroyed in A.D. 70. As long as it stood, every Jew was required to pay the Temple tax. After the destruction of the Temple, the Roman government demanded that the former Jerusalem Temple tax must now be paid to the temple of the pagan god, Jupiter, in Rome. That was a bitter regulation for a Jew to stomach.

But Jesus was wise. He asked to see the coin that was used to pay the census tax, which was stamped with the Emperor's face and inscription. One of them reached into his own pocket and pulled out a Roman coin. Notice, a Jewish man pulled out a Roman coin and displayed his own hypocrisy for everyone to see.

Jesus asked whose image was on the coin. The answer was that the Emperor Caesar's face was on it. "Well then," Jesus replied, "repay to Caesar what belongs to Caesar, and to God what belongs to God."

With His unique wisdom, Jesus lays down a very important principle for us to live by. Every Christian has a double citizenship. We are (1) citizens of the country in which we live. To our country we owe many things: our safety, our public services, educational opportunities, medical care, provision for unemployment and old age. These and other benefits place us under a debt of obligation to our country. Christians have a duty to Caesar in return for the privileges which the rule of Caesar brings to us.

And Christians are also (2) citizens of heaven. There are matters of religion and of principle in which our responsibility is to God Himself. When Christians are convinced that it is God's will that something be done, it must be done. Or if Christians are convinced that something is against God's will, they must resist it, work to change it, and take no part in it.

A real Christian – and this is the truth which Jesus lays down here – is to be at one and the same time a good citizen of our country and a good citizen of the Kingdom of Heaven. And will not fail in their duty to God or to country.

And that wisdom is found in Jesus' answer to His critics and in His lesson for us today. And what is that lesson?

"Well then," Jesus teaches us as citizens of this country and as citizens of heaven, "repay to Caesar what belongs to Caesar, and to God what belongs to God."