

## **"Theme: The Things That Are God's"**

Homily of October 20, 2002

by Fr. Brian Timoney

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"Give to Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God, the things that are God's." Now, this is not intended to be a reminder to all of us that April the 15th is just six months away. Nor is it an appeal to increase your weekly offering, although I am sure the pastor wouldn't mind that. It could be read as a clear statement of the fact that we do have a civic duty to pay our fair share of the public expense that is involved in providing the community with roads and bridges and public transport and clean water, police and fire protection.... in other words, that dreaded word, "taxes."

Certainly the Jewish listeners who heard these words from the Jew, Jesus, would have clearly, clearly understood the second part, "Give to God the things that are God's." In other words, they would have understood that everything, everything, even the things of Caesar, belong to God, that we cannot divide the world into sacred, not sacred. Jesus was not doing that. For Him, as a Jew, it was very, very clear that EVERYthing was created by God, that EVERYthing belongs to God, and that all human endeavor must in some way, reflect God and be given back to God. As followers of Jesus, we are asked to believe the same, give to God the things that are God's.

Now, this immediately raises some questions, especially here in the United States, where separation of Church and State is enshrined in the first amendment of the Constitution that was ratified in 1791. May I say, in passing, that wherever Church and State have been too closely linked, it has been disastrous for the Church. The Church is best served when it is free to govern itself without interference from the State. It's interesting to note that, when John Carroll was proposed as the first United States bishop, the authorities in Rome asked the United States government if he would be acceptable to the government, because that was their custom in Europe. You had to get permission from the King to appoint a bishop. Thomas Jefferson, who was then the Secretary of State, wrote back and said that the United States Government "had no interest in this matter."

The First Amendment was written to protect Churches and Religions from interference by the State. You remember the words, "Congress shall make no law respecting the establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof." In other words, Congress is not to favor one religion over another. There must not be any officially established state religion, such as there was at that time, and still is, in England, where the Crown is the head of the Church of England.

This amendment, however, does not claim that religion has nothing to say to the State. It does not say, as many people do, that churches have no right to comment on what is

regarded as a political matter. Indeed, this Amendment explicitly, towards the end of the Amendment, explicitly gives to all citizens, and that includes religious leaders, the right to petition the government for the redress of grievances. So, religious leaders not only have the right to comment on human affairs, but, indeed, they have a solemn duty to examine human matters in the light of their own religious beliefs. "Give to God the things that are God's." ALL...All human endeavors have a moral component and it is precisely this moral component that religious leaders are called upon to judge. And what is termed "politics" is no exception. Nothing is excluded from the sacred. All things, all things are subject to God. So our bishops do have a right, free exercise of religion. Indeed they have a solemn duty to guide us Catholics in matters such as abortion, capital punishment, housing for the homeless, health services for the poor, just wages, workers' rights, and at this time, in the matter of war or peace with Iraq.

Just because Congress or the Supreme Court or the President says that something is "lawful" does not make it "moral." It's often claimed that this country is deeply religious. Remember the great brouhaha there was a month or two ago over the phrase "one nation under God" and politicians were waving their arms and proclaiming the depth of their religious commitment? How come, then, that when the gravest matters concerning life or death are raised the united voices of religious leaders of many different faiths are totally ignored.... totally ignored? And, indeed, some will say, that these matters are none of their business. It is true that the ultimate moral decision, in matters of human endeavor, must be left to the individual conscience. But we have a serious obligation to strive to have a well-informed conscience. And we, as Catholics, therefor, must give serious weight to the opinions, the guidance, given us by our Pope and our bishops. And, right now, at this moment, it is very, very clear from the statements of our bishops, and indeed from statements made by all the religious leaders of all of what are called the "mainstream churches" .... at this moment, they say, the conditions for a just war have not been met in the case of Iraq and that a unilateral pre-emptive strike against that country would be immoral. We've got to make up our own conscience in the matter, but this is the guidance that is being given to us.

Give to God the things that are God's and, if matters of life and death do not belong to God, tell me what does.

Well, on a less global scale, there are matters of life and death in every day circumstances in the life of this community. And they are the concern of our Social Justice Community and many, many other organizations. And that is why I would urge you, after Mass, to go over to the gym. There are some forty community organizations represented there to tell their story of what they are doing to build up this community that we are living in. You may, in fact, be urged, you may be inspired, to offer your services as a volunteer.

We are also, as a parish, privileged to have amongst us this weekend, two ladies from the community in El Salvador that this parish has been supporting for a number of years. They bear the scars of war, but they are now involved in their own community, in social work, and being supported by this community. And their presence here is really a testament to the fact that this community, this parish, recognizes that in caring about the quality of life for others we are in a very, very practical way, giving to God the things that are God's because Jesus said, "Whatever you do for the least of My brothers and sisters, you do for me." Amen.