

XXII Sunday after Pentecost – Render Unto God

In the name of the Father...

Man is a complex creature: as animal, he is like the beasts; as rational, he is like the angels.

Man is characterized by four innate or God-given instincts: with the animals he shares the desire for preservation of self and the species;¹ with the angels he shares the desire for social living and to seek the truth.

These instincts are hierarchical, ordered to higher – more common, more encompassing or unifying – goods. Thus, self-preservation pertains only to self, preservation of the species to a family, the desire for social living to the members of a society. The truth, however, should be the concern of all men.

Of man's social dimension, Our Lord teaches: *Render unto Caesar that which is Caesar's*. A political animal, man forms societies to pursue common goods, goods which the individual could not procure. The highest natural society is the state which is self-sufficient, providing for all of man's temporal needs.

As a part, each man is required to work for the state's common good, a good which is not alien to him but rather is the greater good of each who participates in it. That is, the individual becomes a part of something greater than himself and thus realizes a higher good for himself.

A common malaise, however, is the attitude of entitlement: *Render unto me that which is mine*. The command to render unto Caesar prohibits parasitic existence, obliging each member of a society to contribute to its common good for the subsequent benefit of all, paying just taxes, obeying just laws. Thus, the notion of *legal justice* articulating man's obligation to the state precedes the notion of *distributive justice* articulating man's participation in the common good. The state – or any society – subsists only in its members who must constitute a common patrimony before it can be participated by those self-same members. Those who do not contribute to the common good worsen the lot not only of the community but ultimately of themselves. We can note that parasitic existence can apply to any community, be it the state, be it a family, be it a church like this one.

Regarding goods which the individual cannot procure, the two natural societies – the family and the state – exist to cultivate virtues which cannot be acquired living in isolation. In a family, for example, children learn basic social virtues, e.g., obedience: parents learn, e.g., domestic prudence. The principle virtues which the state should foster are associated with justice.

¹ These instincts are penetrated and elevated by reason, so that man acts herein not from blind instinct but from rational concerns: man is not a brute beast with reason superadded but a rational creature with a material subsistence.

Should the family or the state fail to cultivate virtue – or cultivate vice – they fail in their purpose, becoming rather vehicles whereby men learn to pander to perverted desires, to the detriment both of themselves and society.

The state, however, is not the ultimate end: higher than the instinct for social living is the desire to seek the truth, which should be a universal concern uniting all men, suggestive of a universal – a catholic – religion.

Certainly not adversative – articulating an opposition of interests – and beyond benign coexistence, Our Lord's words in today's gospel suggest rather a cumulative force: *Render to Caesar that which is Caesar's: moreover, render to God that which is God's*. Certainly, the state is at the service of pursuit of the truth, for the ultimate common good of the state - peace - frees a man from temporal concerns to apply himself to this most defining human activity wherein lies his ultimate happiness. That is, ultimately the state is at the service of religion, or better, the state is at the service of the true religion, and that to its own benefit.² Even Caesar must render unto God.

Thus, the great nineteenth century Pope Leo XIII noted that although the prevailing pluralism of United States of America – a neutrality with regard to religion – had allowed the Catholic Church to prosper, nonetheless the country would have been better off for favoring the Catholic Church and enshrining her teaching in its laws.³ Advocating not a theocracy but Our Lord's social reign, Leo pointed out that the Church cultivates higher virtues in its members which can only redound to the genuine good of the state, to its cohesion and unity. Further, he noted that the Church, more so than the state, carries sanction against vicious behavior through the threat of judgment beyond the grave.⁴

In opposition to Leo's view, in this five-hundredth anniversary of Luther's revolt, we can see how damaging private interpretation is, not only to the individual but even to society. Indeed, pushed to its logical conclusion, the notion of a Protestant society becomes incoherent. As Pope Leo observed: *The true liberty of human society does not consist in every man doing what he pleases, for this would simply end in turmoil and confusion, and bring on the overthrow of the state,*⁵ words which – *mutatis mutandis* – could apply to the teaching of certain elements in the Catholic Church.

Our Lord teaches: *Render unto God that which is God's*. As with the state, even here in religion there can be, if not parasitic existence, an attitude of entitlement – *render unto me* – a not uncommon although perhaps unconscious affliction even among otherwise pious and zealous Catholics, particularly

² [Leo XIII, Libertas Praestantissimum, §21, 22](#)

³ [Leo XIII, Longinqua, §6](#)

⁴ [Libertas, §22](#)

⁵ [Libertas, §10](#)

in their attitude toward the Mass. Their first concern is for themselves. Rather, the first concern in religion must be to glorify God. The first and greatest commandment is to love God, and only then self.

Of the coin of tribute, Our Lord asked: *Whose image is this, and whose inscription?* The image was Caesar's, the inscription was "Son of God", a blasphemy. And yet we were created in the image of God, an image enhanced by the infusion of grace at Baptism wherein we became sons of God. Thereafter, we were set aside for God's purposes, and in the first place for his worship, to render to God that which is God's according to his designs, for which Baptism made us apt. It is not that we are now to be unconcerned about our own spiritual progress, but rather that we must refer it to God.

We can image a small piece of tile or glass of bright color. Of itself, it has a certain brilliance. When, however, an artist arranges it into a mosaic or a glass window, without losing its brilliance it thereby becomes part of something much greater than itself, to which it contributes and from which it draws greater appreciation for itself. Its brilliance now, however, as part of that artistic masterpiece, is referred to and reflects the glory of the artist who fashioned it.

So also it is with us if, fulfilling that highest instinct to seek the truth, we first seek to render to God that which is God's, the worship which is due to Him from rational creatures according to his designs, seeking not first ourselves but rather striving to take up the place ordained by God within that perfect society which is the mosaic of the angels and saints arranged by him and which reflects his glory. Thus, by first referring ourselves to God, being first concerned with his glory, we will subsequently partake of a splendor exceeding anything which could be attained in isolation, a glory of which we could never have conceived.

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