

Ordinary A 29 October 18, 2026

A familiar gospel: the Pharisees and Herodians have set a trap; if Jesus defends paying taxes to Rome, the crowds will turn on him; if Jesus denounces paying taxes, the Romans will arrest and flog him.

So, Jesus makes a clever response: give Caesar what belongs to Caesar and give God what belongs to God.

And for two thousand years, that clever phrase has not settled the conflicting claims of Church and State. What belongs to Caesar? What belongs to God?

Reading those same words, theologians and preachers have reached radically differing interpretations, like the following:

The State is thoroughly evil and opposed to God, so render it nothing. That's what the radical reformers claimed.

Or, the State is ultimate, and God gets whatever the State deigns to give Him. Authoritarian regimes always make that claim, from the French Revolution, the USSR, China, to Nicaragua.

Or, the State is a necessary evil for restricting human sin; that's common in Lutheran thought.

Or, the State is an agent, but not the sole one, for promoting the Common Good. That underpins Catholic social justice teaching.

How do we make sense of all that scripture, and history, two weeks from election day?

Rome exempted the early Jewish-Christians from the duty to sacrifice to its gods. But as Gentiles began to fill the Church, and the Christian community split from the synagogue, Rome withdrew that exemption.

The Book of Revelation, and the martyrs, then portrayed Rome as but the latest tool of Satan. Just like Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, Persia, Greece, and the Seleucids, so now Rome oppressed God's holy people. Not Caesar, but Jesus is Lord.

The Pastoral Letters, on the other hand, hoped for a life of peace and security within the Empire. They claimed that the Church was no threat to any civil government that acted justly, and urged Christians to pray for the Emperor.

Once Constantine declared Christianity legal, the Church rather quickly become something of an official organ of the Empire. Bishops served as magistrates of the empire and provided the one workable network of communications through the realm.

When barbarians attacked Roman frontiers and eventually Rome itself, bishops stepped in secure grain to feed the city, organize relief efforts, and defend against the barbarian invasion. You remember the story of St. Leo and Attila the Hun.

So, What was Caesar's? What was God's? In the East the Church was closely wedded to the State; in the West, the Church was rapidly becoming the State.

At first, the Western Church promoted the theory of "the two swords," contrasting civil and religious authority.

But as the Church took more responsibility for civil affairs, the claim grew that the Church itself had both swords, one of which, the civil power, it bestowed on a king, to wield in the name of the Church.

A forged document even asserted that Constantine had willed to the Pope, forever, the final say in civil government.

This theory soon spawned the claim that the pope could depose any emperor who opposed him, because as head of the Church he had received from God all temporal as well as all spiritual power, and the emperor was but the pope's agent for civil government.

Of course, there was push-back, both in civil and ecclesial circles. Medieval scholastics thought today's gospel passage expresses legitimate independence of civil government from Church authority.

For them, government has the duty to pursue justice for its citizens, promote the Common Good, and ensure that citizens obey the Natural Law.

These functions are not derived from the Church, but are obligation of all states, regardless of the religion of its citizens.

The Church then conveys God's grace as it reveals the higher obligations of salvation.

The rise of nation-states, the weakening of the Papacy after the Great Schism, the Reformation and the claims of the divine rights of kings, all undermined this political balance.

Luther held that Law and Gospel are radical opposites, so the State is a necessary evil, to curb fallen humanity's depravity, not a vehicle for positive good. Lutherans used government power to reform the Church and impose that reform on dissidents, either Catholics or radicals like the Mennonites.

After Luther, other Reformers endorsed explicitly theocratic rule; Calvinists sought to govern along the lines of Old Testament regulations. So called Christian Nationalists have the same aspiration in our day.

Still others, the so-called Radical Reformers, read the same gospel text we heard today and rejected government altogether. Like the author of the Book of Revelation, they concluded that nothing belonged to Caesar; so they refused military service, refused civic oaths, refused municipal engagement.

All this led to the Wars of Religion, persecutions in the name of God, martyrdom on all sides. All over one clever verse of Scripture.

After a century or so of blood-letting, Europe declared "enough" and settled the competing Church-State claims on the most practical basis: cujus regio, eius religio. Whatever religion the local prince followed, that was the established religion for that area.

So, in terms of worship, God got whatever Caesar wanted to give Him.

Disgusted with all this, religious pilgrims fled to America. But they didn't want religious freedom for everyone; just for themselves.

Apologies for that overly-long history lesson, but the point is that our own American solution, "separation of church and state," has not settled the Church-State issue at all. We still spar over school prayer, vouchers for religious schools, abortion, faith-based social services, the death penalty, the civil rights of gay people versus exemptions for churches, conscientious objection and the like.

One clever word from scripture, yet remarkably difficult to understand, interpret and apply.

Regardless of how you conceive of proper civic and church arrangements, we all know that what belongs to God is--- everything. The earth is the Lord's and all its fulness.

In our personal lives, we specify that with the Two Great Commandments: Love the Lord your God with all your heart and all your soul and all your mind and all your strength. And love your neighbor as yourself.

Yet, we do tangle with those we also love, and regularly we have to extend forgiveness, and beg forgiveness, of them and indeed of God.

And when we all take our own inventory each day, we see how small our love is, and how great the mercy and generosity of our God.

How do we apply that in our civic lives? Specific cases are not always clearcut and simple.

Faithful citizenship calls us to genuine discernment, to generosity, to reconciliation, as we disciples of Jesus seek to be leaven for a world hungering for justice.

So, no matter how you read all this scripture in the civic arena, no matter how you vote on November 3rd, perhaps our common prayer might be:

You alone are God our Lord, and there is no other.

Formed in your image, we bear the imprint of Your face and Your name is engraved on our hearts.

In a world loyal to other powers, let our lives be governed by the standard of the gospel

and the currency of Your Kingdom.

As we render to others the freedom of conscience that is their right,

may we freely render to You

the allegiance You alone deserve.

We ask this through Christ the Lord.

And the people of God said, Amen

Ordinary A 29 October 18, 2026 Children's version

That was a hard gospel. After mass, I'll spend a few minutes trying to make sense of it with your parents, and I hope they will talk with you about it at home.

For now, I'd like to remind you of the second reading, the Letter to the Church at Thessalonica.

The guys who wrote it, Paul, Silas and Timothy were leaders of the church, kind of like Bishop Caggiano, or Fr. Richard and myself.

All three were missionaries, which means they traveled all around to proclaim the gospel.

And all three were thrown in prison by the Romans, because they were preaching that Jesus, not the Roman Emperor, was the real king and ruler.

And the Letter said they were praying for the members of the Church.

And that's what this has to do with you this morning.

Do you know that the leaders of our Church pray for you?

Every mass we pray for the pope and our bishop, and all the bishops and priests and deacons and every member of the Church.

But did you know that the Pope prays for you?

And Bishop Caggiano does, and Fr. Richard and I do.
Maybe that doesn't surprise you.

And maybe you even know that Miss Loren and Miss Laurie, and David our music minister, they also pray for you.

Your catechists you will meet with today, they pray for you. You probably already knew that.

Now look out at the other folks in church. They pray for you. Some of those people you know, like your parents and the parents of your friends; those adults are praying for you.

But what about the rest?

The adults who lead our ministries,
the people who come here on Thursdays to adore
Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament,
the people who go on the Emmaus Retreats,
the FIAT people who organize our food drives and
collect toys at Christmas,
those who study the scriptures with Fr. Richard,
those who help people after there is a death in their
family,
all those people are praying for you.

Or at least they will be after this homily!

They do so because the best way to love someone is to pray for them.

And when they do, they pray that you will be safe, and that you will be happy; but especially they pray that each one of you will come to know Jesus and become friends with Jesus.

And they also pray for themselves, that they will be good examples of faith and faithfulness for you.

They show that good example by coming to Church each Sunday, to receive the Body and Blood of Christ in the Eucharist.

They give that example by putting their gifts in the offertory basket, sharing some money with us, so we can keep the lights on and heat the church in the winter and cool it in the summer, so we can be here for you.

They give that example by how they try to make our parish a family of families.

And why do they do all that? For the same reasons that Paul and Silas and Timothy did for the people at Thessalonica.

Because God loves you and has chosen you to belong to His family. Just like them.

All those adults who are praying for you remember that each one of them was a child just like you, and someone, lots of someones, prayed for them and handed on to them the gift of faith and examples of how to be friends with Jesus.

All that started with the first apostles and disciples, like Paul and Silas and Timothy. Friends of Jesus come to know how much God loves them, and what it is a gift that God has chosen them to believe in His Son.

And they give thanks for that gift, they show good example of receiving that gift, by handing it on to the next generation.

We have the Scriptures, because people did that for their children and grandchildren, year after year, until it came down to us.

And we adults want to do the same for you. We want you to know how much God loves you, and we want you to know that God has chosen you to become friends with His Son Jesus.

One way we do that is by praying for you. Another way is by trying to be good examples to you, bringing you here so we can share the stories of the Good News with you.

And we want to make this parish a place where it's easier to meet Jesus, easier to become friends with Him, easier for you to be good.

Ok, those of you in levels 1 and 2 can go with Miss Loren now, and the rest of you can go back to your parents, and we all will continue to pray for one another.