TWENTY NINTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME. 2026

"Then repay to Caesar what belongs to Caesar, and to God what belongs to God." (Matthew 22:21)

This is the foundational text for a uniquely Christian understanding of the human community. It was shocking to many in the days of the Lord Jesus Christ's earthly ministry. To the Jews, Israel was supposed to be a unitary society, religious law and civil law being entirely identical. There was simply The Law. Citizenship was inseparable from the right to worship at the Temple. Religion and ethnicity were one. To the Greeks, to be a citizen of a "polis", or state, necessarily included at least formal reverence for the "gods" of the polis, such that to question the "gods" was a form of treason, punishable by death (as Socrates found out). Non citizens could certainly live in the polis and be allowed their own religious rites, but to be a citizen was to share, at least formally, in the traditional rites of the polis. The Romans' resolute practicality led them to be surprisingly creative sometimes, and they carefully, though hesitantly, explored the idea that people who didn't share in Rome's traditional cults might nonetheless be Roman citizens. Only with the Lord Jesus and the early days of His Church, however, was a clear distinction made between citizenship and Faith. A fully healthy human community, the New Testament tells us, has two distinct societies that embrace many of the same people, need to work together for the common good, but are quite distinct from each other. These two societies are the State ("Caesar") and the Church, entrusted with the Word of God and the Sacraments of Salvation.

As the Roman Empire gradually embraced Christianity and increasingly found itself fighting for survival, it tended to think of Church and State almost as one, with the Emperor in charge of both. The Church in the Greco-Roman Empire basically accepted this superstition, but the Bishops of Rome, the popes, resisted it. As Pope Gelasius I put it in 494, "There are two principles which chiefly serve to order this world: the sacred authority of bishops and the power of kings." Still, partly because even the Bishops of Rome needed physical protection in a dangerous world, the superstition that the emperor, or even the local king, is also the master of the Church, endured. It was only in one of my favorite eras, the late 11th Century, that the power emperors claimed over the Church was decisively challenged. I remember fondly the college paper I wrote about 28 January 1077, the day when, at Canosa in central Italy, an Emperor publicly begged the Bishop of Rome for absolution from his public sins. There were a lot of subsequent ups and downs for that particular pope and that particular emperor, but being emperor was never the same again.

From then on the West, first Europe and then the Americas, would benefit from having two basically independent societies, usually cooperating with each other but sometimes fighting with each other. Not having a simply unitary society, a fantasy all too common among Islamist adherents of so-called "Sharia law" , the West - first Europe and then the Americas - was able to develop, not without bumps and bruises along the way,into a free but not morally anarchic civilization. The State (Caesar) was able to provide for the common defense and general welfare in practical ways without narrow religious interference, while the Church was able to proclaim the saving word of Christ in freedom, and simultaneously offer essential moral challenges to the State, lest practicality deteriorate into mere cynicism and exploitation. Some kings,like England's late Tudors and early Stuarts, have tried to make themselves heads of the Church, but they have always failed in the end. Some political movements, like Fascism and

Socialism, have tried to impose a unitary society, taking over the State and smothering the Church, but they have always failed in the end. They always will fail. The Roman Catholic revolution that asserted the New Testament against the divine right of emperors in the 11th Century has been and will be repeated again and again (sometimes, as in 17th Century England, by militant Protestants). The State will never be allowed a complete take over of our civilization. The New Testament clearly reserves to the State responsibility for the common defense and general welfare, and so we need to give Caesar his due. The New Testament also clearly asserts the independence of the Church to teach God's word, as revealed by Jesus Christ, in its fullness, free of state supervision and interference, and so we need to defend the liberty of the Church.

At the heart of God's word in its fullness is the glorious good news of the Savior Jesus Christ, the news of His mercy for sinners and His victory over death. In Catholic devotion, the visual image of the Risen Lord Jesus' mercy for sinners is the Sacred Heart.

It is hard for people to love God if they remain stuck in their sins. They need to repent. It is also hard for people to love God if they do not think they can be forgiven. They need to hope confidently in God's mercy. The two part message of repentance and hope is the message of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, proclaimed to the Church by three saints of 17th Century France, John Eudes, Claud La Columbiere, and, above all, Margaret-Mary Alacoque. They used the image of the Sacred Heart of Jesus to remind Christians of that boundless divine Love which led God's Eternal Word to assume human nature, to institute the Holy Eucharist, and to die upon the Cross, as the perfect Sacrifice reconciling sinful human beings to the all holy God.

The image of the Sacred Heart of Jesus is seldom found outside of Catholic devotions, but what that image symbolizes is essential to Christianity. The Risen Lord Jesus, sharing fully, as God and Man, in Divine Life, is still present and active on earth to give hope and mercy to sinners. I was surprised to discover that the militantly Protestant English warlord Oliver Cromwell's chaplain (an "Independent" preacher) wrote a book entitled "The Heart of Christ in Heaven Towards Sinners on Earth." Good heavens, I mentally exclaimed - that is the Sacred Heart of Jesus! Catholic culture is naturally much more visual. Instead of a book, we have a picture and, well, sometimes a picture really is worth a thousand words. The image of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, promulgated by St. Margaret Mary, powerfully declares that we have a tender and passionate Lover in Heaven, who is present also to us on earth, drawing us to repentance, and promising us limitless mercy, mercy that will carry us all the way into Eternal Life.

With all of their many flaws, Oliver Cromwell's "puritan" people did fight against the essentially heathen superstition of the divine right of kings. Caesar has his rights, but he has no power to save. Only one Name has the power to save, the sweet, sacred, powerful name of Jesus, in whose Sacred Heart we place all our trust. The Church, while duly respecting Caesar, has the sacred duty and high privilege of pointing beyond him, to Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, Who alone is atonement for our sins, perfect mercy for our flaws, and the Way to eternal life.

As this life ends, Caesar and the State have no more to offer us. But the Church offers us the Sacred Heart of Jesus, our Savior and our all. As our life ends, may we be able to say what St. Margaret-Mary said, "I need nothing but God, and to lose myself in the Heart of Jesus."