

# ECHOING GOD'S WORD IN THE CATHOLIC COMMUNITY

OCTOBER 22, 2023  
TWENTY-NINTH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

## SCRIPTURES:

**Isaiah 45:1,4-6**

Cyrus does not know he is an agent of God.

**1 Thessalonians 1:1-5**

Paul knows about their faith, hope, and love.

**Matthew 22:15-21**

Responsibilities to God and to the world

## SCRIPTURE BACKGROUND:

### Matthew:

By the time Matthew wrote his Gospel for a community of Jewish followers of Jesus (around 85 CE), the Jewish community as a whole, that small group who believed in Jesus Christ and those who did not, was in serious disarray. The *Herodian*, who had been supporters of the Roman occupation and of the puppet-king Herod, had been totally discredited in the eyes of the Jewish people. The Romans had retaliated against dissident Jewish zealots who had tried to overthrow the imperial forces; the Temple had been destroyed in Jerusalem (70 CE); the leaders of the Jewish faith were scattered around the empire. Could it be that the *Pharisees* had been right? Coexistence with Rome might be against God's law!

Matthew reaches back into the tradition of his community and offers Jesus' teaching on responsibility in the public order: Obey civil authority, even Caesar, in matters that pertain to the civil order, but obey God in whatever pertains to the religious and moral order. The structures of traditional Judaism are no more! What are Jews to do? How is God to be served now that temple worship has been obliterated? The hereditary priesthood cannot function without a temple. Christian Jews, those who believe in Jesus but have continued to observe the laws and practices of ancient Judaism, are also in a quandary. How are they to distinguish between duties to God and duties to society? Matthew would have them be very clear about these matters. God still comes first, even though the outward signs of religion are no more: the Temple, sacrifices, priesthood, etc. God is still God. The civil order is a reality. There is no escaping the need to conform to the laws of the empire as concerns everyday life, commerce, taxes, etc. Caesar must not be rejected just because Caesar has destroyed the Temple!

The Greek text uses a word for *entrapment* that really refers to the use of a *snare* that always results in the *death* of the victim. Our translation says that the Pharisees wanted *to entangle Jesus in his talk*. That is a very weak English verb for the Greek verb which is closer to our words: *to trap in a snare where the victim will choke to death!* They want Jesus to *choke* on his words so that he can be put to *death*.

Civil authority is not to be opposed just because it is not identical to religious authority. The governments of this world can be instruments of God's will also.

## **Isaiah:**

Cyrus, King of Persia, does not know that he is God's agent. He will be acting according to the Lord's interest when he allows the people of Israel to return to their homeland and to rebuild their temple after the Exile in Babylon. Isaiah refers to Cyrus as the Lord's *Anointed (a messiah)*. God will arrange that Cyrus be successful in his conquests of other nations so that he can afford to let the Israelites go back home after he has overcome Babylon and set free its slaves in a general amnesty. God is Lord also of the other nations, and kings do his bidding even when they do not know the Lord. This section from the Book of Isaiah comes to us from a disciple of the original Isaiah. This one is with the Jewish people in their exile in Babylon. He writes to give them hope that Cyrus of Persia will overcome Babylon and allow the Jews to return to their homeland.

## **Thessalonians:**

Paul writes to the Church at Thessalonica, this first of all the books of the Christian Scriptures. He had proclaimed the good news of Jesus Christ there just 20 years after the death and resurrection of Jesus. Forced to leave the city when a great disagreement arose among the Jews in the city, Paul, now preaching in Corinth, is gratified to hear that his words have surely taken root and flourished, bearing good fruit, as he has just heard through Timothy. There is also bad news, about which he will write in this letter also. We will come to that problem later as we read this letter. The word of God has come to them with power, it seems. The result is that a marvelously powerful faith is present among them in Thessalonica.

## **QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION**

1. Have the governments of the world become so corrupt and so evil that God wants us to withdraw from all involvement and all support of those institutions that are related to politics and to public authority? What would you say to people who thought that we should avoid all contact and all cooperation with civil authority?
2. What do you think of persons such as St. Thomas More who, as Lord High Chancellor of England, served the British King, Henry VIII, as long as he could preserve his own integrity and his own sense of truth? Under what circumstances would you not be able to cooperate with political leaders who supported harmful policies and practiced destructive works in their official roles?
3. What do you think of the new *Catechism of the Catholic Church* which says that Catholics have a moral duty to pay taxes, to vote, and to defend their country? What kind of *moral duty* are they talking about? Would it be a *sin* not to pay taxes, not to vote, not to defend one's country? Should your parish hold classes for adults on these matters?

## **SUGGESTION FOR CHRISTIAN ACTION**

Hold a discussion with your family or with some of your friends on a Christian's responsibility to participate in the political process. Set up some ground rules that should guide us in fulfilling these responsibilities.

## PRAYER

Lord of nations, God eternal, hear our songs of praise and plea  
for our nation strong and mighty; May your blessings ever be  
on our land, a land of beauty, land of freedom, land of love;  
fields and valleys, plains and mountains, spreading 'neath blue skies above.  
(From a hymn by H. Glen Lanier, 1924-1978)

## CATHOLIC PASTORAL PRACTICES

Just a few weeks from now, we will have the responsibility of going to the polls and casting our votes in federal, state, and local elections. We will be rendering “to Caesar what is Caesar’s and to God what is God’s.”

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* lays out some moral responsibilities not previously stressed for Catholics in previous catechisms. The *catechism* of the Council of Trent said nothing about civic obligations. The *Baltimore Catechism* in the United States did not address questions of voter responsibility. However, our latest *catechism*, which is based on the most recent official Church documents from Vatican II (1963-65) and from the Revised Code of Canon Law (1983), cannot be silent when it comes to the civic duties of the Catholic people. Wherever in the world, and under whatever form of government, Catholics are urged to exercise their God-given rights and responsibilities when it comes to voting. “*Submission to authority and co-responsibility for the common good make it morally obligatory to pay taxes, to exercise the right to vote, and to defend one’s country*” (#2240). Caesar is served when we fulfill our obligations to our country. It will take a long time, I am sure, for us to be able to integrate this teaching about our moral responsibilities in the civic order.

When was the last time you heard a sermon or a religious education teaching on the moral responsibilities of citizens? Perhaps we are urged to either vote for or against certain laws because of their moral and ethical implications. In some instances, we may even come dangerously close to supporting one set of candidates over another because of their stand on one issue or another, for instance abortion, capital punishment, or social welfare. We condemn legislators who support the so-called “pro-choice” position on abortion, but we fail to oppose those who favor capital punishment.

Efforts to “get out the vote” should never be linked to one party or one candidate, in the name of the Church or in the name of the Gospel. Political activists have a right, of course, to align themselves with one of the political parties and to support whatever candidate they choose. But the Church and the Gospel cannot be used for these partisan purposes.