

**Reflection on the Gospel-29th Sunday in Ordinary Time Year A  
(Matthew 22:15-21)**

-Veronica Lawson RSM

The emergence of a common enemy is often the catalyst for sworn enemies to unite. In first century Palestine, Pharisees were the respected religious teachers of the law and Herodians represented secular Jewish power and wealth. They despised each other on both religious and political grounds. When faced with a perceived threat to their authority, however, they united in opposition. Jesus of Nazareth becomes the threat that unites them. His teaching and healing draw the crowds and threaten their authority. They come together and try to set a trap for him. In attempting to set him up, they ironically pay him the greatest of tributes: addressing him as “teacher”, they acknowledge his sincerity and admit that he teaches the way of God in accordance with the truth. They witness to his lack of concern with status and hierarchical division.

The question of these traditional enemies is intended to put Jesus in a “no win” position: “Is it lawful to pay tribute to the emperor or not?” Jesus turns the question back upon them. He lets them know that he is aware of their malicious intent and asks them to produce the coin used for the tax. He thus makes the issue one of images, a sensitive issue for all Jews, rather than of tribute. The Roman denarius that they produce bears the bust of the Roman emperor and the Latin inscription, “Tiberius Caesar, son of the divine Augustus, High Priest”.

Jesus’ response, “Give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God”, can be interpreted in several ways. Is Jesus simply exposing their hypocrisy as bearers of images? From a Jewish perspective, everything belongs to God, the earth and all its riches. The disciples of the Pharisees and the Herodians are Jews, even if the sympathies of the latter lean towards the Roman occupiers. Is he telling them to pay the tax while still recognising God’s prior claim? Is he telling them not to pay the tax precisely because the emperor has no claim on what belongs to God? Is he critiquing the Roman occupation or legitimizing it? Or is he saying something else? They are left to interpret his response as they wish. One thing is clear: Jesus’ words have nothing to do with the modern distinction between Church and secular state. There are good reasons for paying taxes in a secular state and for contributing financially to the life of the Church, something we may need to revisit in the light of pandemic and the closing of our places of worship. It is quite anachronistic, however, to invoke this text in support of paying state taxes or of supporting the Church financially. The story is more about sincerity and truth in our relationships with each other and with the God of all truth. That is the key criterion for any personal or global alliance.