

Homily, October 19, 2008
 Twenty-ninth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Is 45:1,4-6; Ps 96; 1 Thes 1:1-5b; Mt 22:15-21

"Then repay ... to God what belongs to God."

What would Jesus do?
 I guess he would pay his taxes!

There is always a temptation to read and preach on this passage as though it's a comment about Church and State or religion and politics. With the election less than three weeks away, the temptation is even greater.

But I will resist because my sense is that Jesus was more concerned with the Pharisees themselves than with their question.

"Repay to God what belongs to God." There are two unasked questions that follow that statement: "What belongs to God?" and, "How do we repay it?"

I hope you would answer the first question by saying "I belong to God," or "We belong to God". To use the Gospel metaphor, if the coin belongs to Cesar because it bears his image, then it follows that we belong to God because we are made in His image.

How do you answer the second question? How do you repay yourself to God?

Well, you are a Roman Catholic Christian. Repay him by living a Christian life within the life of his Church!

What is a Christian life?
 What do we commit to if we call ourselves Christians?

I came up with four dimensions that I think need to be present in a healthy Christian spirituality. There's nothing magic about the number, it's just a convenient way to group them.



The first dimension of our Christian life is Scripture and the Sacraments.

St. Jerome said ignorance of scripture is ignorance of God. Now Jerome was a grump, but he had a point: the Bible is our sacred scripture. It is the Word of God passed on to us through the Prophets and the Apostles. We should read it, study it, pray with it. How well do you know it?

- What did Jesus say in the Sermon on the Mount?
- How many parables can you retell?
- Do you know the story of the early Church?
- What are your favorite Psalms?
- What's the story of Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Rebekah, Job, Jonah, Ruth?

Through God's word we receive instruction for living and hope for salvation.

Through the Sacraments we receive Grace to strengthen our resolve and support our hope. Eucharist and Reconciliation are the sacraments of everyday Christian life. Can you receive them more often than you are?



The second dimension our Christian life is living with others, that is, in communion and community.

God is the Trinity and God is love. There is no isolation in God. If we are made in His image, we need others.

- We need the people who have gone before us: the saints and all the holy people who give us guidance and examples of Christian living and support us in prayer.
- We need each other: to strengthen one another in faith and to share the joys and the challenges of our way of life. "Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them." What greater invitation do you need?
- And future generations need us too. We must pass on the faith to them.



The third dimension of our Christian life is almsgiving, good works, and justice.

All the prophets and Jesus himself have told us to give alms, to care for the poor, and the widow and the orphan. We are to come to the aid of people in physical and spiritual need: feeding, clothing, teaching, consoling, forgiving. The list goes on.

We need to do this personally and we need to be active citizens and see that these things are done in society. That is the essence of social justice.

- St. John wrote: “whoever says ‘I know Christ’, but does not keep his commandments, is a liar”.
- St. James said: “Faith of itself, if it does not have works, is dead”.



The fourth dimension of our Christian life is prayer, asceticism, and morality.

“Pray without ceasing.” Paul says. Jesus prayed. He taught his disciples to pray.

The Church has great traditions of private prayer, communal prayer, praying with scripture, praying with beads, praying as you walk. It gives us standard prayers to get us started and suggestions on how to pray. And it’s all directed at spending time with God. Find the time to pray, the help is there.

The Church asks us to practice a very gentle asceticism: abstain from meat now and then, fast a little more often, don’t eat an hour before mass, be chaste and faithful to your state in life. Enjoy the pleasures of the senses. They too are a gift from God .. but don’t let them dominate you. There is no joy in that, just ask someone with an addiction.

Asceticism goes along with prayer. Time is also a something we have to sacrifice for a fuller Christian life. We can’t be addicted to our schedules.

We can use prayer and asceticism to help strengthen our moral life. Sin and virtue are real.

- Greed, stealing, lying, gluttony, fornication, adultery, gossiping, pride are still sins.
- Prudence, courage, temperance, justice, patience, humility are still virtues.

Avoid sin. Practice virtue.



Scripture, Others, Almsgiving, Prayer: S, O, A, P.
(Hey, it spells something and it's easy to remember!)

Now ... we can't really repay to God what we owe him. But we can do what he asks and live the life he gives us.

Repay God with your life.
Just make sure you live it in all its dimensions.