

Today's Gospel contains, perhaps, one of the best-known verses of Scripture, "Give to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's." The context is Jesus engaged in teaching in the Jerusalem Temple, and the scene reflects the growing tension between him and the nation's leaders that would soon lead to his death.

The question put to Jesus by the Pharisees and the Herodians was "is it permissible to pay taxes to Caesar or not?" It was set to trap him: "If he encouraged the tax, he would offend both the Pharisees and the common people who resented it. If he condemned the tax, he could be denounced to the Roman authorities as a political trouble-maker."

What then of his reply, 'Give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar; and to God what belongs to God'? First, it won the day. Matthew reports that "when [they] heard [his reply], they were amazed, and they went away." The denarius used for paying the tax had the image of the Roman emperor, Caesar. Thus his coins could be returned to him in taxes.

But what even more explains the amazement of those present was the way that Jesus' answer transformed the issue. Jesus had made a conversation about taxes and Caesar into talk about God as well. "Give to God the things that are God's." All present knew the first commandment of the Law, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and strength."

Jesus' answer reminds us that our secular responsibilities are not to be separated from our love of God. Indeed, the Second Vatican Council has reminded us, especially the lay faithful, "to seek the kingdom of God by engaging in temporal affairs." The Council immediately clarifies this: "the laity, when engaged in the work and business of society and in the ordinary circumstances of social life and family, which as it were, constitute their very existence ... contribute to the sanctification of the world, as from within like leaven."

When we fulfill our responsibilities as members of society, we are giving to God what belongs to God. We find God in the Eucharist on Sunday, and we also find God when we fulfill our family and civic responsibilities on weekdays. Indeed, Sunday's Eucharist and daily life are linked for the Eucharist is the source of our strength to contribute to the world's sanctification and in the Eucharist we offer ourselves and our good works to the Father through Jesus' sacrifice on Calvary.

Fr David Willis op