

“Repay God What Belongs to God”

- 29th Sunday
- October 18, 2020
- Stephen V. Sundborg, S.J.

“Repay to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and (repay) to God what belongs to God.” It is a great temptation two weeks before the national election to wax eloquent on what “repaying to Caesar what belongs to Caesar” means, but I’m not going to do that. It is enough to say succinctly that it means to be an active citizen, to pay taxes, to vote, to engage in the civic issues that affect the lives of all especially the lives of those least represented, and to deliberate according to an informed conscience about candidates and issues. Enough said about “repaying to Caesar what belongs to Caesar”.

I want to focus on the other half of this oft-quoted saying of Jesus: “repay to God what belongs to God.” Well what does belong to God? Nothing less than everything of creation because he made it. However complex was the way of creation, God is the creator of the universe and all within it. It may have started in time with “The Big Bang”, but that was only because in the eternal present of God there was “The Big Joy”, “The Big Creativity”, “The Big Love”. All belongs to God; all comes from God; all returns to God. This is the big answer to “repaying to God what belongs to God”. For us it means repaying with our very life that comes from God. Our life is amazing. Did you know that a single cell of our bodies is more complex in its structure than a metropolitan city... and we have about four trillion cells, though who’s counting? Did you know that our whole blood supply flows through our lungs every minute to be restocked with oxygen? What an amazing pump and hydraulic system. And still more amazing as the psalmist says, “The Lord looks down and sees all of humanity—all 7.5 billion of us—he fashioned the heart of each and knows all their works.” The heart of each of us was fashioned by God. Our life comes from God; our life belongs to God.

God has given us an amazing world. We are on a minor planet of our star, the sun. The next closest star is 25 trillion miles away, and there are about 200 million stars in our galaxy; and our galaxy—The Milky Way—is only one of a billion galaxies. What a home! God holds in his hands in the eternal now in which he lives the whole of the universe and us within it. He holds it smilingly, rejoicing, gladly; a universe he created, looked upon, and saw that it was “very good” and invites to attain the fullest potential he intended for it. What a God! What a Creator! What a great love of the heart of each of us!

In this incredible universe God sees each one of us, knows each one of us, loves each one of us, wanted each one of us, created each one of us. No person is born unwanted, unseen, unloved—each is wanted, seen, and loved by God. The only way to “repay to God what belongs to God” as Jesus tells us to do, is to give our very life to God in love, in prayer, in service, in care for others, in care for the home God gave us, in family, in country. As the Latin author said, “man was not made for himself alone”. We are not made for ourselves alone; we belong to others; we belong to God.

I had an uncle named Ray, the brother of my Mom. When Ray was about 92, and after the death of his wife Kay, he lived in a nursing home. One day his son, my cousin John, called me and said, “Ray, your uncle, told me he’d like to have a conversation with you.” So I went up to Lynwood to visit Ray. I found him in his room, and after awhile said, “John tells me you wanted to see me, Ray. What’s up?” Ray said, “When I went to college I stopped practicing as a Catholic. One day while at the University of Washington I received a letter from my mother from our hometown of Hoquiam. In that letter she begged and pleaded with me to return to the Church. I never answered that letter. Father Steve, I want to answer it now! How do I do it?” Wow, the pull of a Mom from whom we are born when we come to the end of our lives. I told Ray it was easy. I asked him, “What do you remember of your faith? Ray responded,

“Who made me? God made me. Why did God make me? God made me to praise, reverence, and serve him in this life and to be happy with him in the next.” I was stunned. Ray at 92 still remembered his Baltimore Catechism which the nuns in Our Lady of Good Help drilled into him in grade school in Hoquiam. I told Ray that was good enough for me. Ray knew who made him and to whom he belonged and to whom he was going. So I asked him to make a confession. He knew that too. “Bless me father for I have sinned it has been about 75 years since my last confession.” I blessed him, told him, “Ray you are in. You are now a practicing Catholic again; I’ll bring you communion. You have answered your Mom’s letter. She always knew you would.” Then I asked him, “Ray, do you have any questions?” “Yes”, he said. “How much are the dues?” I told him, “Ray, you are not joining the Moose or the Elks, but the Catholic Church. There are no dues.” That’s what a Jesuit would say. Your pastor, Fr. Mike Ryan, would probably have said, “I’ll leave an envelope behind.”

“God made me to praise, reverence, and serve him in this life and to be happy with him in the next.” Jesus didn’t know the Baltimore Catechism, so he said, “Repay to God what belongs to God.” We owe our whole life, existence, home in the universe, our God-fashioned hearts, and all our sisters and brothers to God. We repay God by praising him in prayer and worship, by reverencing him in all he has created, and by serving him in serving one another, all of whom he loves. These, perhaps, are the dues for being happy with him and Ray and his Mom and with our beloved in the next life.