

Gospel text

Matthew 22: 15-21

15 Then the Pharisees went to take advice on how to trap Jesus. 16 So they sent some of their disciples with the Herodians to ask Jesus this question: "Teacher, we know that you are a genuine person and you teach the way of God with uprightness, you treat no one with deference, but remain impartial. 17 Tell us, then, what you think: is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar?" 18 Having clearly perceived their malice, Jesus answered them, "Hypocritical people, why do you seek to put me to the test?" 19 Show me the currency used to pay the tax." They showed him the Roman currency of the denarius. 20 Jesus asked them, "Whose effigy and inscription is on this coin?" 21 They replied, "Caesar's." Then Jesus declared to them, "Give then to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's."

Gospel commentary - Homily

What is God's?

Once upon a time, a community of 13 semi-cloistered Benedictine nuns lived in a large, four-storey monastery set in a huge estate with fields and animals¹. Mother Helen, the abbess, began to think: "What should we do? It's too big for us and too expensive to maintain?" So she went to see Sister Caroline, regional head of the Congregation of the Sisters of the Holy Hearts of Jesus and Mary. Sister Caroline was also reflecting on their large building, now home to just fifty nuns with an average age of 86. Sister Caroline suddenly had an idea: why not combine the assets of both communities and build a residence that could serve not only the nuns, but also the citizens? The Pax Habitat project was born, which would accommodate 54 nuns and 66 elderly lay people, where the rental cost of 25 units would be limited to 25% of the tenant's income, and 35 could offer a service for non-self-sufficient people; families in the surrounding area would be offered a day-care center for 70 children. It was a bold and innovative project, because it didn't fit into any box: it touched on both eldercare and housing. Vatican's permission was also required, and the right people needed to be involved. But the project was a success.

Why tell this story? Because it combines business knowledge with a compassionate heart; it's economics and love working together. It seems an interesting context for today's Gospel. We are presented with Matthew's version of a story he copies from Mark. The context is one of escalating conflict between Jesus in Jerusalem and the religious authorities. The evangelist names two groups who want him to say something incriminating that would justify his arrest. The first group were the Pharisees, the religious fundamentalists, for whom the Roman presence was a sacrilege and it was their duty to refuse all collaboration. The second group were the Herodians, supporters or officials of King Herod Antipas of Galilee, happy to support the Roman presence. So, the evangelist presents us with these two groups, sworn enemies with opposing visions, allying against Jesus. This context is important for understanding the question posed by the two groups as to whether or not to pay the Roman tax. For, if Jesus supports the Roman tax, the Pharisees will cry scandal; if Jesus denounces the Roman tax, the Herodians will cry scandal. We know Jesus' response: "Give then to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's."

The first part of the answer is easy to understand: if you use the denarius, the Roman currency, you have to be logical to the end. Participation in socio-economic life obliges you to use one of the instruments of that socio-economic life. The question in the Gospel no doubt reflected a question that members of the Christian community were asking themselves as they awaited the return of Jesus, and therefore wondered whether they should participate in socio-economic life. The answer in the Gospel is clear: yes.

But what is the meaning of the second part of Jesus' answer: "Give to God what is God's"? Of course, we could answer: "Everything belongs to God". But this answer, if true, is still too vague. I prefer the answer: the heart, it is the heart that belongs to God. In the biblical world, the heart is a person's decision-making center, what motivates and orients his or her action. But the socio-economic world has its own rules. I remember a university economics professor whom I invited to speak on economics in a Bible course, and who shocked the Haitian students when he declared: "Haiti is worth nothing". He was speaking from an economic point of view, in a context of supply and demand and trade, and he considered that the country had nothing worthwhile to offer. In a way, he was right, and ignoring the laws of the market and all the mechanics of economics can do more harm than good. But economics is a means, an instrument. It's up to human beings to give it a direction, a purpose. Let's return to the story of the two nuns behind the Pax Habitat project. In the same situation, a developer could have found a solution that maximized his profit, and therefore could have simply built condos that he would have sold at a high price. But because of their values, the two nuns opted for a different solution that meets real needs, while respecting socio-economic rules. Believers can experience a certain tension between their socio-economic world and the world of their faith. Some choose the religious world by withdrawing completely from the socio-economic world, as is the case with certain religious fundamentalists. Others consider the two worlds incompatible, and surrender themselves completely to the socio-economic rules they deem inescapable, relegating religion to the sphere of piety. But Jesus' answer is different: enter the socio-economic world, since you are part of society, but at the same time it is your responsibility to give it a direction compatible with what God has willed for our world.

-André Gilbert, Gatineau, July 2023

¹ The full story was originally published in [La Presse](#) (Montreal, Canada) by Katia Gagnon, July 8, 2013. Link to the story (French): [Housing for seniors - A small revolution in Joliette](#) ▲