

by Joan Mitchell, CSJ

Dig into your pockets, purse, or wallet. Find some coins or bills, and place them on a table around an open bible. Light a candle.

LEADER: Gracious God, help us realize that you are present in all spheres of our lives. Help us integrate the circles in which we live.

ALL: Help us to speak civilly to one another, respecting our differences and embracing the insights we each bring to our conversations.

The common good is the heart of Catholic social teaching. The Second Vatican Council defined this principle as the sum of all that is necessary for people to thrive. Government sits at the intersection of private and public good. Politicians have the work of creating and funding laws that calibrate the budget to provide all citizens with at least minimally adequate food, shelter, water, education, health care.

The United States Conference of Bishops provides the table on this page to illustrate how business, government, religious groups, and individuals work together to provide for folks who need support or a leg up out of poverty.

SUNDAY

by SUNDAY

We set the table for our brothers and sisters together. We set the table by getting to know our neighbors. In her book *The New Better Off*, Courtney Martin reports people actually live longer where they know one another and create social capital through interacting.

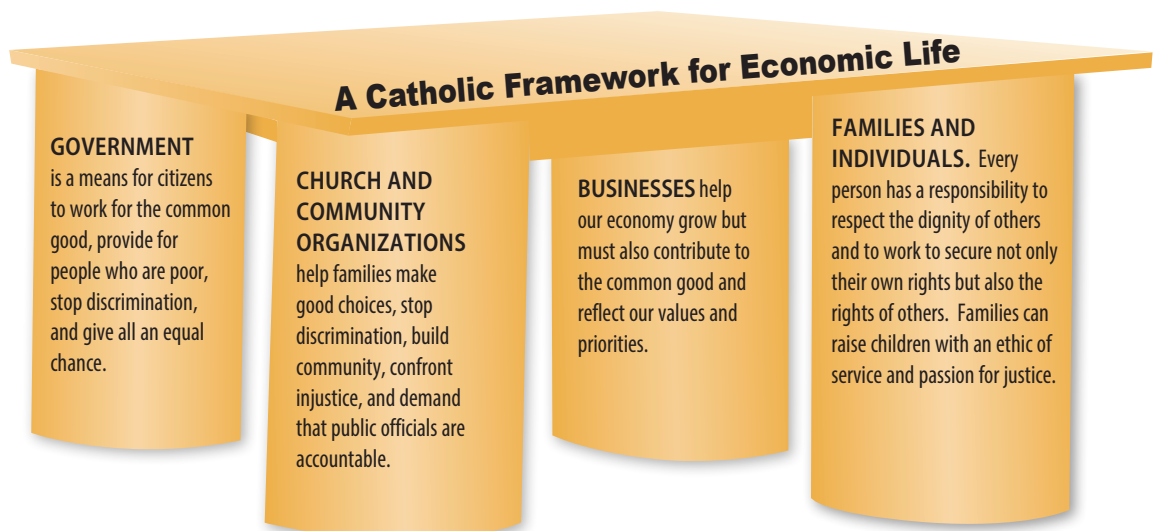
As Jesus teaches in the temple courtyards, he engages controversial questions like those that provoke our 24/7 news coverage today. Can a faithful Jew pay Roman taxes? Cultural tensions underlie this question. How does a Jew keep God's law faithfully under the rule of foreigners, who do not worship one God, hold the same moral standards, or celebrate the same feasts?

Immigration concerns many countries. Who deserves to be

admitted? What benefit will they be to our economy? Not only are many immigrants fleeing poverty and war as did many people in earlier crises. Now climate change has made formerly habitable and farmable land totally inhospitable to human beings. Where does our responsibility lie? What does love of neighbor ask us to do? As the 2024 elections heat up, so do our public conversations. As followers of Jesus and faithful citizens of our country, what does our public life ask of us?

The Catholic Framework for Economic Life below illustrates ways four segments of society form the legs on the table of plenty for all. We seek our common good together.

● **How do you participate in activities on each leg of the table?**



GOSPEL



Jesus answers a question with a question.

NARRATOR: The Pharisees went off and plotted how they might entrap Jesus in speech. They sent their disciples to him with the Herodians, saying:

PHARISEE 1: Teacher, we know that you are a truthful man and that you teach the way of God in accordance with the truth. You are not concerned with anyone's opinion, for you do not regard a person's status.

PHARISEE 2: Tell us, then, what is your opinion, is it lawful to pay

the census tax to Caesar or not?

JESUS: Why are you testing me, you hypocrites? Show me the coin that pays the census tax.

NARRATOR: They handed him the Roman coin.

JESUS: Whose image is this and whose inscription?

PHARISEES: Caesar's.

JESUS: Then give back to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God.

Matthew 22:15-21

suggests that one can indeed be loyal both to a religious tradition and to a secular power.

● **What of immeasurable value do you work to pay forward?**

Jesus' answer to his entrappers is more than clever. Taking into account the original cultural context underscores how perceptively Jesus reads the confrontation. When his questioners promptly produce the coin Jesus asks to see, he immediately exposes their hypocrisy.

Any Jew of Jesus' day who was observant of the Mosaic Law would not carry a coin minted with the image of the emperor on it. These coins picture the emperor as divine. The second of the ten commandments forbids making or worshiping idols. Anyone carrying the Roman coin with its "graven image" has already settled the issue of relating to the Roman Empire and its taxation.

The Pharisees raise a question still with us. To what degree do we accommodate religion to culture? The Pharisees encouraged and practiced keeping the Law of Moses strictly, both as a way of being distinct from foreign occupation and at the same time surviving as a faith community in the midst of its cultural influences.

● **What, if any, American values seem unchristian to you?**

● **How do you respond to Pope Francis, who strongly critiques an "economy of exclusion" that deifies the free market (*Joy of the Gospel* #53)?**

Jesus calls us to image God in our lives.

by Arthur E. Zannoni

Entrapment is as old as the bible. In Sunday's gospel two religious groups—Pharisees and Herodians—partner to entrap Jesus. They deliberately set Jesus up when they approach him with the question, "Is it lawful to pay the census tax to Caesar or not?"

Either a no or a yes answer will get Jesus in trouble. If Jesus says no, they have grounds to accuse him of sedition before the Roman Procurator. A yes answer will make Jesus unpopular with the people who find the Roman tax quite burdensome.

Jesus dismisses their flattery and in typical rabbinic fashion

responds to their question with a question. He asks whose image the coin for paying the tax carries. When his questioners identify the image as Caesar's, Jesus evades their trap and responds, "Then repay to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God."

Jesus' saying uses the Greek word *apodidomi*, meaning *to repay* or *give back*. This word gives Jesus' saying a special nuance. Jesus is talking about the just reimbursement of someone who has a legitimate claim on us. The saying evenly balances two legitimate claims—God and government. Jesus' challenge to repay or give back

Making the Pharisees into the “bad guys” of the gospel can foster anti-Semitic stereotyping of Jewish people today. Jesus did not abolish the law and the prophets or everything the Pharisees taught. The first Christians were Jews who kept the Law of Moses along with Jesus’ interpretation of it and his own unique teachings.

Like the Pharisees Jesus was a practicing Jew and a reformer of his Jewish religion. As a matter of fact, many of Jesus’ teachings are derived from the Pharisees. The Pharisees addressed God as Father, so did Jesus. Their teachers were called Rabbi, so was Jesus. They believed in the resurrection, so did Jesus. They both taught the common people and functioned in synagogues.

Both the Pharisees and Jesus taught how important the good deed was (Hebrew *mitzvah*) and encouraged their followers to practice such deeds. The Pharisees were not all hypocrites. The gospel tells stories about just and devout Pharisees such as those who warned Jesus of the risks he was taking (Luke 13.31) and Nicodemus who dialogues with Jesus (John 3.1-21).

● What stereotypes do you regularly resist?

The question of whose image the coin carries contains an allusion easy to miss. Jews of Jesus’ time knew from the book of Genesis who carries the image and likeness



of God. “So God created humankind in God’s image, in the image of God, God created them; male and female God created them” (Genesis 1.27).

Jesus’ response to the Pharisees and Herodians is more than a clever dodge. Jesus confronts a worldview about who images God—Caesar or the human person. Jesus insists we cannot keep separate our obligations to God and those to government. God blesses and calls us to integrate the spheres of our lives and image the One who made us.

The image they bear and project must concern Christians even more than movie stars and athletes. These celebrities worry how they look, the make-up they wear or the muscles they have developed, their ability to act and appear on the movie screen or playing field. Being made to God’s image and likeness

calls the Christian to act as God acts with compassion and forgiveness toward everyone.

Christians image God by helping the poor, caring for the abused and sick, visiting the imprisoned, feeding the hungry, grieving with those who mourn, and listening attentively to those who ache. We give to God our very selves through our goodness to others.

We carry the image of God into the civil sphere of government. Our advocacy for just and compassionate government policies toward the poor, toward health care, education, and immigration are examples of how we image God in the public square.

The conflicts and dissent we have with the civil rule also show God’s image in us. Conscientious objection images a God of peace. Christians who oppose the torture of prisoners and capital punishment reveal a God of compassion. Believers who protest the abuse of the environment reveal a respect for the Creator of all that lives.

The conflicts of our lives challenge us to ask: who do I serve? How we image God will reveal our answer.

● How do you see God imaged in you?

● How do you see God imaged in others, including politicians?

Cyrus serves God.

Several artifacts from the Ancient Near Eastern world depict a ceremony wherein a god reaches out to one who would be king. The act of grasping his hand was seen as conferral of royal authority. This human king then ruled in place of the god.

In Sunday's reading from Second Isaiah, Israel's God confers power and authority on Cyrus the Persian king. Cyrus subdues nations and releases captive kings so that they might serve him unfettered. He throws open doors and barred gates in a spirit of freedom. The Israelites who have been captive in Babylon benefit from Cyrus's enlightened policies.

In the Old Testament, Cyrus' edict is found in Ezra 1.2-4. The edict was his "Emancipation Proclamation" to the Jews in exile in Babylon. In addition to returning the Jews to their homeland, Cyrus returned the sacred vessels the Babylonians had looted from the Jerusalem Temple before they destroyed it in 587 B.C. He also sent money to help the Jews rebuild their Temple and the destroyed city of Jerusalem.

The first reading from Second Isaiah provides a powerful background for meditating on this Sunday's gospel. The voice of God refers to a foreign head of empire, Cyrus the Great, as the head of empire, Cyrus the Great, as the "anointed one" (the Hebrew word is *messiah*).

This pagan emperor of the Persians earns this title because he unknowingly has become God's instrument in the restoration of the exiled Jews to their homeland.

In exile the prophet experiences God as Creator of all.

God calls Cyrus his anointed one.

Thus says God to his anointed, to Cyrus, whose hand I grasp, subduing nations before him and making kings run in his service, opening doors before him—and leaving the gates unbarred.

For the sake of my servant Jacob, of Israel, my chosen one, I have called you by your name, giving you a title though you do not know me. I am the Holy One, and there is no other; besides me there is no god.

I arm you though you do not know me, so that from the rising to the setting of the sun people may know there is no one besides me. I am the Holy One; there is no other.

Isaiah 45.1, 4-6

- When have you experienced the awesomeness of God that Isaiah describes?
- How do you see God working in and through the many new immigrants from different nations who practice different religions?

PRAY

LEADER: God we ask you to help us to be constantly aware of your presence in all people.

ALL: Give God glory and honor.

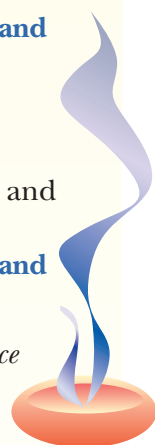
LEADER: God help us to realize that you are the creator of all and the source of all justice.

ALL: Give God glory and honor.

LEADER: God, you challenge us to be responsible believers and citizens at all times.

ALL: Give God glory and honor.

Exchange a sign of peace and blessing with one another



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Bible Study: The Gospel of Mark

Beginning In January, we read large chunks of Mark's gospel at Sunday Eucharist. Sister Joan places those excerpts we hear in the larger context of Mark's whole gospel. This 88-page book is ideal for Bible study groups, homilists, and individuals interested in how each gospel reflects Jesus' life and teaching. Only \$10.00.

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