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# Moral Challenges in the Social Sphere

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## **Moral Challenges in the Social Sphere**

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## **Twenty-Ninth Sunday in Ordinary Time**

Sunday Readings for October 19, 2014 for Cycle A:

Is 45:1-6; Ps 96:1-10; 1 Thes 1:1-5; Mt 22:15-21

### **MORAL CHALLENGES IN THE SOCIAL SPHERE**

*Lawrence E. Frizzell*

How do people who believe in God coordinate their religious and political responsibilities? In certain totalitarian states, such as Nazi Germany, religion was tolerated only as an expression of personal piety; no exercise of conscience with regard to the moral dimensions of the political or social orders could be discussed or put into action. This attempt to stifle the impact that faith should have on daily life was perhaps more clever than the direct and comprehensive attack on religion made by various militant atheistic regimes. Some Christians were lulled into a situation that divided their lives into compartments. The laws of the National Socialist government (enacted without any parliamentary debate) successively destroyed the civil and human rights of Jews and other minorities and provided "justification" for the most vicious attack on human life in the recorded history of the western world.

Could similar tragedies happen in our society today? We would be very naive to deny the possibility. By harking back to her biblical heritage, the Church offers principles that we need to face such issues in these times.

The disciples of Isaiah, teachers living among the exiled Jewish communities in Babylon, taught that the God of Israel is the sole Lord of history. Although evildoers may threaten the rights of others and attempt to destroy nations and cultures, eventually they must face divine judgment for their misuse of human freedom. When a good leader arises, such as Cyrus (king of the Medes and Persians) who conquered the Babylonian Empire in 539 BC, this person is called "servant of God." The prophet declared that Cyrus, a pagan ruler, is even an anointed (messiah) of God! During the long exile the people may have felt that God had abandoned them, but now their fidelity is rewarded.

After 63 BC, when the Roman army was invited into the land of Israel to solve an acute political problem, the presence of the Empire gradually became more and more oppressive to many Jews. Most resented the heavy taxation and some struck out violently against those Jews who collaborated with the Romans. Where did Jesus stand on this important issue? The Gospel records an attempt of Jesus' opponents to trap him: either he would be branded a collaborator or openly declare that he favored the Zealots and their guerilla warfare. "Is it lawful to pay tax to the emperor or not?"

Jesus asked them to produce a coin. This demonstrated that his opponents were not scrupulous about carrying something bearing the image of Tiberius Caesar, who claimed to be divine. Jesus answered in an enigmatic way, so that no one could accuse him of association with either of the opposing groups. "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's, but give to God what is God's" (Mt 22:21) is perhaps one of the most abused texts of the Gospel. It should not be interpreted to mean that

Jesus admitted two separate (and perhaps equal) spheres of influence, the political and the religious. The principle "separation of church and state" should not lead to a denial that the religious community and its members have a right to evaluate the moral aspects of political and social questions. Just as every group in a free society voices its position on such issues, so should the Church enunciate its teaching so that it applies clearly to current questions.

From ancient times the Jewish tradition has maintained that God is the supreme Ruler over all creation; all forms of authority must be exercised in accord with divine law and at the service of divine justice. At the time when Jesus confronted compromise on the part of those in authority, he showed that he taught the same doctrine. Pilate declared to Jesus: "Do you not know that I have power to release you and I have power to crucify you?" Jesus answered: "You would not have power over me if it had not been given to you from above" (Jn 19:10-11). All who exercise authority must see their work as a service of God, otherwise they will make an idol either of self or the state. Down through the centuries both forms of idolatry continue to wreak havoc upon human beings and the rest of creation.