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Isaiah 45:1, 4-6  
1 Thessalonians 1:1-5b  
Matthew 22:15-21

29<sup>TH</sup> SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME  
OCTOBER 15-16 HOMILY  
“TAXES”

Fill in the blank. Two things are certain: death and... ..taxes.

“Taxes!” - Just say the word and all kinds of feelings are evoked, especially in the current political climate and heading into another election year.

Facing insurmountable debt and growing social needs, the debate around spending cuts versus revenue increases - aka 'taxes' - is a divisive one.

But this is nothing new. Our gospel presents a tax debate going on during the time of Jesus – over the lawfulness of God’s people paying taxes!

The Herodians agreed with paying taxes - both to “keep the peace” with Rome and for many practical benefits, like Rome's well built roads and bridges. The Pharisees were opposed; for doing so implied giving allegiance to the Roman emperor, when in fact, their only allegiance should be to God.

Despite their differences, both groups had one thing in common: they were trying to trap Jesus. This plot was a kind of “payback” as Jesus had been indicting the religious leaders in a number of His parables.

Refusing to take sides and fall victim to their malice, Jesus finds in their question a “teachable moment.”

Jesus affirms that our ultimate allegiance belongs to God alone, but that Caesar can make some legitimate demands upon us as well.

Today’s scriptures “stretch us beyond the familiar” to view government and taxes with the lens of faith.

We learn that God is sovereign and uses everyone and everything to accomplish God's saving will.

Consider Cyrus of Persia from our first reading. By means of this pagan ruler and his governing policies, God brought Israel back from exile into their own land again, paving the way for the rebuilding of Jerusalem and later of the temple.

Talk about a "stretch," Cyrus is even addressed as God's "anointed," a word reserved only for those who had been kings of Israel.

God can use government – yes, even its taxes – to serve God's saving will.

And what is God's saving will but the common good and well-being of all, with a special concern for the needs of the most vulnerable: the unborn, mentally challenged, low wage earners, chronically ill...

God makes use of Caesar as one important means of responding to human need. I have learned this first hand through my daily work with Catholic Charities. So much of the good we do and services we provide are made possible by government grants, 11 million of a 13 million dollar budget. Government allocates the funds, drawn from tax revenue, and Catholic Charities provides the infrastructure of caring and competent personnel with quality human services.

Knowing this has changed my feelings come April and I owe the IRS! Writing that check feels more like a contribution - a "stretch" for me to be sure.

In his article, "Why I should pay more taxes," Arul Menezes of Microsoft and member of "Wealth for the Common Good" writes:

"I arrived from India with \$250 in my pocket, and got where I am based on my hard work. This is true, but it's not the whole truth. Much of my education was funded by government grants. Every day I benefit from schools, hospitals, and roads that were built and paid for by previous generations less well off, yet had the collective will to invest in our future. Taxes are the **dues** we pay back our society so others can have similar benefits. It is only fair and just that we pay comparable **dues** to help many struggling citizens now, and ensure that America gives our children and grandchildren the same opportunities it gave to me."

Menezes' remarks echo our Church's definition of justice: "giving what is due" to God and neighbor.

Might we be stretched further and think of taxes as giving what is due....

To our own children and grandchildren, insuring them a good education and clean environment.

To our elderly, that their health needs are met and latter years be dignified ones.

To our men and women in uniform who put their lives on the line for our freedoms.

To the growing numbers slipping into poverty, many with kids going hungry.

To those who face an unforeseen crisis through lost employment, catastrophic illness, or natural disaster.

"They" could become "us" in a heartbeat!

Catholic social teaching is adamant that neither persons nor companies should shirk their dues through dishonesty or scheming loopholes.

It is a moral imperative that those who made their success and profits because of our system of government invest back in their communities.

If there were to be an ethical tax loophole, Starbuck's founder Howard Schultz describes it like this:

*“All individuals of net-worth would be required to choose. If you don’t want to pay taxes, pay 501c3 non-profits the exact amount you would have paid in taxes.*

*Help feed the poor, fund a cure for an illness, educate inner city kids, support re-entry programs for paroled prisoners, or provide seed money for low income women to start their own businesses.”*

While the Church challenges Caesar to use revenue for socially responsible needs, Catholic social teaching also calls for fiscal responsibility.

It is a matter of justice that excessive debt not be laid as a burden on our children and future generations.

As people who carry dual citizenship, citizens of the Kingdom and citizens of our nation, we have a gospel mandate to see that tax revenue is not only spent wisely with accountability, but that monies are used justly and according to God's values.

And when God and Caesar clash, as will happen, we are to hold our elected officials accountable to respect life and insure services to the neediest.

Our Bishops, in their Labor Day Statement, wrote:

*“A just framework for future budgets must eliminate fraud and waste, and cannot rely on disproportionate cuts in essential services to the poor. It requires shared sacrifice by all, including raising adequate revenues.”*

As "Faithful Citizens," let us stretch ourselves, our elected leaders, and our nation “beyond the familiar” of special interests, corporate greed, convenient remedies opposed to life - that what we repay to Caesar {lift coin} can more and more serve God's cause, the life and dignity of every woman, man, and child.