

Back in 2002, a man named Michael Newdow filed a lawsuit in California. Mr. Newdow was upset and was feeling that his rights were being violated because the Pledge of Allegiance includes the words “one nation under God.” In his understanding the Constitution of the United States functions to prevent the federal government from, in his words, “infusing religion into public life.” In Mr. Newdow’s estimation, a public school that requires any child to recite anything at all, including or especially the Pledge of Allegiance, that includes any reference to God amounts to that very thing. As far as he could see, the public school his own daughter attended was infusing religion into public life and into *her* against her will. And so he forbade his daughter from saying the Pledge of Allegiance at her school. It turned out later that the daughter was not offended herself by the wording of the Pledge.

In an interview Mr. Newdow was asked how it was that he came to file his lawsuit. He said that one day he noticed how coins in the United States are impressed with the words “In God We Trust”. He said that he did not trust in God and that having words contrary to his beliefs on our currency was a violation of his rights and a failure on the part of the federal government to rightly uphold and enforce the Constitution. But instead of filing suit to have the words “In God We Trust” removed from our currency, he decided he would begin his campaign to have all mention of God withdrawn from public life by suing to have the words “one nation under God” removed from the Pledge of Allegiance. And, although Mr. Newdow was deeply offended by the words on his money, he continued to spend it as he wished.

Mr. Newdow won his lawsuit at first, but lost later on appeal because it was ruled that he was not within his rights to have his daughter involved. Mr. Newdow went on to plot his next moves.

Clashes between church and state are nothing new as we may gather from the scene in today's Gospel reading. For us, one wonders what Jesus might have to say about this case involving the Pledge of Allegiance. We can only speculate. Wouldn't Jesus certainly affirm the truth of our nation being under God, under *Him*? Would Jesus agree with the concept of the separation of church and state as some people understand it? Suppose Jesus were here and someone asked Him, "what do you think: should the words "one nation under God" be removed from the Pledge of Allegiance? What would be His answer?

These are interesting questions and we could probably debate them for a long time. On the other hand, maybe we couldn't. Jesus just might answer the question concerning the wording of the Pledge of Allegiance in much the same way that He answered the Pharisees and the Herodians. These men were trying to entrap Jesus by presenting Him with a dilemma. Either way He answered, they believed, would incriminate Him with either of one of two parties. If He said that it was wrong to pay tribute to Caesar, He would be in trouble with the Romans. If He said it was right to pay tribute to Caesar, He would be seen to betray His own people, the Jews. Jesus had just gotten through telling a few parables that cast the Pharisees in a bad light. Now they were going to get back at Him. They conspired together with the Herodians to ask Him a question strategically devised to corner Him and publicly discredit Him.

The thing in question was the poll tax. This was a tax exacted by the Roman government on every male person from the age of fourteen through sixty-five, and by every female from the age of twelve through sixty-five. The amount of the poll tax was one denarius. If you recall, one denarius was a day's labor for the typical worker, like those who were hired to work in the vineyard.

The Jews resented the tax because for them, God was the only king. Their nation was a theocracy. The idea of paying a tax to any earthly king amounted to an admission of the validity of his kingship which in turn amounted to an insult to God. So the question the Pharisees and the Herodians put to Jesus was a particularly highly charged dilemma.

But the answer they got from Jesus was definitely not what they had expected. He defused the bomb they had set. Jesus foiled their scheme and raised the level of discussion to a higher plane. Some things do belong to the State. Jesus points out that the coin has Caesar's image on it, signifying it belongs to him. Render unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's.

But simple rendering unto Caesar what already belongs to him is not Jesus' primary concern. He goes on to say that we are to render unto God the things that belong to God. What things? What belongs to God that we are to render unto Him? Jesus does draw a distinction: coins bearing the image of Caesar are what belong to Caesar and therefore are to be given back to him. What then, are we to give back to God?

The Greek word used in this passage for the appearance of Caesar on the coin is "eikon", probably pronounced in the Greek more like *eye-kone*. Some translations of the New Testament have Jesus' question to his inquirers regarding the coin as "whose head is this, and whose title?" Others have "whose *likeness* and inscription is this?" or, "whose *image* is this and inscription?" Now the Greek dictionary lists several proper translations for the word eikon, the first two being *likeness* and *image*.

Consider the creation account in the first chapter of Genesis. God has created the sun, the moon and the stars. He's brought forth green plants bearing seed, and the fishes, and the things that crawl upon the earth. Next he brings forth birds, and

every living thing, and cattle and all sorts of beasts of the field. And He blesses them and bids them to be fruitful and multiply. And then, in verse 26, God says: let us make man in our image, after our likeness.

Jesus could just as well say “show me a human being. Whose image and likeness does he or she bear?” We would have to answer, “God.” We were created in God’s image. That means we share God’s capacity to make choices freely, to love, to procreate, to live in harmony with creation and with God. We bear the image and likeness of God in that regard. Therefore, we must render *ourselves* to God.

Not only we were created by God, we were *redeemed* by God incarnate after we had fallen into sin and become subject to evil and death. Render unto God the things that belong to God.

It is like a man who designs a valuable pearl necklace to give to his beloved wife. Before he can give it to her, it’s stolen. But as luck would have it, the man sees that very same necklace in a pawn shop window, and pays a lot of money to get it back. First he made it, then he bought it.

And so we belong to God. First He made us in His image and likeness. And then He sent His own Son Jesus Christ to die on the cross to save us from our sins and to win us back to Him.

We bear the image of God. We owe everything to God, especially our selves, our souls and bodies. We are to submit to Him to become like Him. We are to grow into the likeness of Jesus Christ. We do so by His grace, and by obeying Him, following Him, reading and hearing His word, and by eating the Bread of Heaven, His flesh and drinking the Cup of Salvation, His blood.

Yes, we are also to be good citizens. We enjoy many things that the State provides. We want good roads to drive on. We want protection from lawless

people who are out to do us harm. We want to send our children to good schools where they will be safe and can get a good education. If our homes were to catch on fire, we want someone to come to put the fire out as soon as possible. And so on. All these things and more are provided by the government. We are therefore obligated to support the State, to pay our fair share of taxes that support all these things.

But we do not owe the State our hearts and souls. We are not to put our faith in the State as we ought to put our faith in God. Render unto God the things that are God's. Amen.