HOMILY for 29th SUNDAY in ORDINARY TIME – Year A

This Sunday's Gospel talks about taxes. As I reflect on that, I'm reminded of this new cute story that I'd like to share with you.

"You have a nice home," said a stranger to the landowner. "I imagine it will be worth about $120,000."

"Oh, no," replied the owner, "it's worth at least $250,000. Are you thinking about buying the home?"

"No, sir" said the stranger, "I'm your local tax assessor."

Anyhow, there are two things that we know for sure in this life: death & taxes. The problem is that we have often focused only on one of those 2 sure things in this work, namely, taxes. We tend to forget about death & who has power over it. That is why we have assumed that the IRS & the government are more powerful than God; & we should be afraid of them only. That is why the Pharisees tried to set up a trap for Jesus over taxes & asked, "Teacher,… is it lawful to pay tax to the emperor or not?" If Jesus said "Yes", He would infuriate the whole Jewish society that has suffered under the Roman occupation & would hate to support their enemies by paying taxes. But, if Jesus said "No", He would be in trouble with the Roman government & face death penalty for sure. Jesus certainly was caught between a rock & a hard place with this tax question. Or, at least that is what the Pharisees thought. They assumed that they were able to corner Jesus. But, Jesus came back at them with this response, "Why are you trying to trip me up, you hypocrites? Show me the coin used for the tax… Whose head is this & whose inscription?" They answered, "Caesar's." Jesus said, "Then, give to Caesar what is Caesar's; but give to God what is God's."

As I said above, we have often focused only on taxes & worldly power that has control over it. We tend to ignore death & the divine power that has control over it. That is why Jesus reminded the Pharisees & all of us, "Give to the IRD & worldly power what is theirs; but give to God what is Gods'." In other words, do try to take care of your civic responsibilities such as taxes; but don't forget to keep up your spiritual responsibilities to God & be prepared to answer to God at the moment of our death. Unfortunately, most people have usually thought that they could ignore their spiritual responsibilities to God & get away with it at the moment of death. That is why we have seen all sorts of immoral acts such as cheating, lying, hate, violence, & so on happen around the world every day without any remorse. That is why the world has become more secular & turned away from God without second thought. The only ones who would always take their spiritual responsibilities to God seriously & worry about their moments of death are the saints & holy people. These folks do not want to disappoint God & owe God a huge spiritual debts on Judgment Day. Rather, they want the Lord to tell them at the Gate of Heaven, "Good & faithful servants, come & inherit the kingdom that has been prepared for you from the foundation of the world."

As you might know, people often do not take their spiritual responsibilities or relationship with God seriously in our day & age. It is not surprised for us to see that people usually could not recognize God's work in their lives & in the world. In fact, this Sunday's First Reading lets us know how God was able to use the new occupying empire & its king Cyrus to carry out the divine mysterious plan in the world. It reads, "Thus says the Lord to His anointed, Cyrus, whose right hand I grasp; subduing nations before him, & making kings run in his service,

opening doors before him & leaving the gates unbarred: for the sake of Jacob, my servant, of Israel, my chosen one, I have called you by your name, giving you a title, though you knew me not." Evidently prophet Isaiah saw the empire Assyria as the rod of Yahweh's anger to occupy Israel & punish it for its sins. Later, prophet Jeremiah declared the Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar to be the servant of God who was able to defeat the Assyrian empire even though it still occupied Israel. Now, the Lord used the new rising Persian Empire to defeat the old falling Babylonian empire & rebuild Israel. The new King Cyrus is not accused of pride or arrogance. He fulfills every wish of God & slowly carries out God's work of restoring Israel. He liberates the Jews & mandates the rebuilding of Jerusalem. One important purpose of his mission is that he himself may come to know that Yahweh is God. Pagans may serve Yahweh even though they do not recognize the God of Israel. Ultimately, Yahweh must be known from the rising of the sun to its setting.

Like the rest of the world, we often cannot see how God works in our lives or understand God's mysterious plans in the world. We assume that God only works through good & holy people & straight-forward plans. We think that God could not use God's own ways to carry out God's will. But, as we could see from today's First Reading & throughout our human history, God could use the occupiers like King Cyrus, bad leaders in the Church & politics, or even terrible events like September 11 to purify us through suffering & call us home to God. God might want to let violent acts & hateful rhetoric happen all over the place to help us learn how important love & peace is in a home & society. God could have allowed Covid-19, which basically stopped the world from its normal daily functions & shown everyone who is really in charge. God might have let mental health problem come up lately to help us see why we need a good spiritual life.

My dear brothers & sisters, Jesus said, "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's, but give to God what is God's." Caesar & his government have demanded us to comply to his tax laws & would penalize us severely if we fail to obey them somehow. What is it that you think we owe God? I hope we would give God what God deserves & appreciate God's mysterious works in our lives & in the world.