

Render to God the Things That Are God's
(Adopted from a homily given on Saturday, September 02, 2017)
(Mt 22:15-22)

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

We often write our names, or other identifying marks, on things we own. We put our name inside the front cover of books so that those to whom we lend them remember to return them. We place our initials, or a creative drawing, on our cup at picnics so that we, and everyone else, knows it belongs to us. Priests sometimes have their names sewn into the collar of their riasa because they're hard to tell apart at clergy gatherings. Examples can easily be multiplied.

Identifying marks are what's behind Jesus' instruction, "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's" (Mt 22:21). In New Testament times, coins bore the image of the reigning emperor, indicating to whom they ultimately belonged. Jesus tacitly but clearly draws a parallel to the image of God in us: the coin has Caesar's image on it so it rightly belongs to him; you have God's image stamped on you so you rightly belong to God. Give your coins to the king of this fleeting world and give yourself to the eternal King of kings.

Images were used in other contexts in ancient times. For example, a signet ring could be used to make an impression in wax, which might be used to seal a letter. We still follow such practices when sending important letters, placing a stamp or seal across the enclosing edges of an envelope to discourage tampering in the mail. In the case of a wax impression made with a signet ring, the recipient could in principle take the letter back to the sender and have him put his ring into the imprint in the wax to confirm the authenticity of its origin.

The image in which God made us is in certain respects like the imprint made by a ring in wax. He stamped His image on us in such a way that He is a perfect fit. There is much that can be said regarding God's image in us, especially as it is related to our freedom and our rationality, but being created in the image of God ultimately means being created to be His home. His image in us is a unique design, a unique imprint, that He enters to unite Himself to us. He longs to place His life in our innermost being. We were created with freedom and rationality so that we might freely give ourselves to be the home of our King whose image we bear.

The sad part of the story, of course, is that in the fall, that image becomes damaged--broken but not destroyed. Consequently God doesn't fit so perfectly in us. It's as if the sun melted the wax a little bit, and the ring doesn't quite sit perfectly into the imprint that it had once made. Thus our image needs to be transformed. Saint Paul expresses this problem to the Romans when he says that we've exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling man and birds and animals and reptiles. We worship creation instead of the Creator, and we start to become what we worship. (Rom 1:20-25)

We damage the image of God in us when we try to put a created thing in the place where only God belongs. It is as if we are trying to use the wrong size wrench on a bolt, rounding the edges of the head so that the proper size wrench no longer fits snugly enough to loosen the bolt. The

image needs to be restored so that it once again becomes the place where God fits perfectly. Our ultimate destination, St Paul tells us, is to be “conformed to the image of His Son” (Rom 8:29). Several times in Scriptures we are told that Christ is the image of the Father or the exact representation of the Father (2 Cor 4:4; Col 1:15; Heb 1:3). Our calling in this life is to have our image re-formed, returning us to the image of Christ Himself. “We all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, *are being transformed into the same image* from glory to glory, just as by the Spirit of the Lord” (2 Cor 3:18; emphasis added).

In these texts we are being told that our image, damaged and deformed, is in need of repair, but God has come to be among us in the person of Jesus Christ to restore our image. He doesn't want to repair it just so we are healthy physically or psychologically, mentally or socially--however important those types of healing may be. He wants to repair us so that He once again fits perfectly into our lives. So that we experience the very purpose of our existence. To render ourselves to God, as Christ instructs us in today's Gospel, is to offer ourselves to Him not only to be His home, as we were created to be, but to repair and reform His image in us so that He is at home in His home, so to speak. This, to be healed spiritually, is what it is to be a true and genuine human being, as we were created to be.

Let us consider two very practical ways by which we can let our Lord reshape His image in us. The first comes from a prayer we pray time and time again in the services of the Church. After remembering the Mother of God and all the saints, we hear, “let us offer ourselves and one another and our whole life to Christ our God.” Very, very simple. We say it so often that maybe we don't notice how profoundly important it is. But this prayer is precisely what our Lord told us to do when He said: “Give to God the things that are God's.” In response to the deacon's exhortation to offer the entirety of our own life, and our shared life, to God, we the faithful respond: “To You, O Lord.” We affirm, by direct address to God Himself, that we belong to Him alone, and that we are offering all that He has given us back to Him. We do not offer some portion of our life, even 99% of it, but *all* our life to Him--for He created it and it belongs to Him. So one of the simplest ways in which we can fulfill our Lord's instruction is to say this prayer with great intentionality and focus. If we really want to offer our life to God, say: Lord, this is the life You've given me, I give it back to You to do with as You want. To You, O Lord.

Later in this Divine Liturgy we will hear, “Your own of Your own, we offer unto You on behalf of all and for all.” Metropolitan Kallistos (Ware) provides a very powerful image for this poignant moment of the service. God gave us wheat and grapes, he says, and we use them to make bread and wine (*The Orthodox Way*, SVS Press 1993, pp. 69-70). We then give the bread and wine back to Him, and say, “This is Yours; You gave it to us; we made some bread and wine, and we give them back to You.” God in turn takes that bread and wine, and He transforms them into the body and blood of His Son, and then He gives them back to us. This is what happens when we offer what God has given us – our very life – back to Him; He takes it and transforms it. He makes it divine. “Theosis” we call it. So there is really nothing more profound than this simple offering that we can make of our lives, and we can do so in such simple ways--by these prayers that we pray so often in the life of the Church.

The second practical suggestion comes from the Gospel reading that we have today for the Holy Martyr Mamas (9/2; Jn 15:1-10). Here the Lord teaches us with the beautiful imagery of the vine and the branches: that we are to abide in Him as the branches abide in their vine. This is such vivid imagery because we see so clearly that if a branch is severed from its vine, it's going to wither and die. The whole point of the vine is to produce grapes. And to produce grapes, it will need to be pruned. So too we will need to be changed and transformed, pruned, to produce the fullness of the fruit, which is the whole point of being human.

It's in this context that our Lord expresses the teaching that is so often repeated by the ascetic fathers, "Apart from Me, you can do nothing" (Jn 15:5). Well, we might say, what do you mean? People are constantly doing all kinds of things – building gigantic buildings, sending people into space, conquering nations; all sorts of things are going on in the world, seemingly apart from Christ. But our Lord means that we can do nothing that has any eternal durability, that passes from this life into the next, apart from Him. Everything that we do apart from Christ perishes. Jesus emphasizes this later in the passage: "You did not choose Me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit, and *that your fruit should remain*" (Jn 15:16; emphasis added). The fruit produced in us when we abide in Christ, when we live with Him instead of apart from Him, *remains*. It has an enduring, sustaining and life-giving quality to it.

In Ecclesiastes, Solomon repeatedly teaches: "vanity of vanities, all is vanity". Everything that we do is vanity, everything under the sun, everything that we do on our own strength is vanity. But in the midst of his intense awareness that everything done under the sun--i.e., everything done apart from God--is empty and fleeting, he places this gem: "I know that whatever God does will be forever" (Eccl 3:14). The way that we transcend this dying, perishing world is to let the Lord do His work in us for it will be forever. And yet He doesn't do this work against our will, but at our free offering of ourselves--giving to God the things that are God's. Then the fruit of the Spirit is formed and shaped in us, the fruit that's produced in a branch connected to the vine: Love and joy, peace and patience, goodness and kindness, faithfulness and gentleness, self-control (Gal 5:22). These are the characteristics of a full, rich human life that God is transforming into his image from glory to glory. It is Him residing in us, doing His work.

So we see again that in the simplest ways we just have to strive to do nothing apart from Christ, and we do that merely by saying "Lord, be with me as I perform this task; help me in this task. Lord, I'm anxious about this meeting or exam that's coming up; will You calm my soul? Will You help me to trust in You, to rely on You?" And we pray in this way always offering thanks to God, acknowledging that what we have comes from Him. In these humble ways we "render to God the things that our God's" and thus allow our lives to be united to His work in this world. We are not trying to accomplish things by our own effort, but are letting our lives be energized by His work within us. If we can do that, our image is being re-formed in such a way that He will come and fit perfectly into the imprint that He has created in us. And that communion with Him will abide even after the world perishes, it will extend into eternity because He Himself has produced it in us. Let us, therefore, render to God the things that are God's.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.