

29th Sunday in Ordinary Time (A)  
(Isaiah 45:1.4-6 / Matthew 22:15-21)  
22.10.2023

Dear brothers and sisters,

When we are asked: 'Is it permissible to do this or not?' we have to be cautious because most of the time this is not a question leading to life and truth. To the contrary such a question is often a trick question, a kind of trap, because it itself implies that only one true answer is possible: 'yes' or 'no'. But life is not as simple as that. Situations in life are not black or white, right or wrong, but black and white, (not black or white but black and white). Let us look at ourselves: Sometimes we are right, sometimes we are wrong. We are not always right, we are not always wrong. Life is complex and our answer to that kind of question must always be shaded, 'nuancée' as we say in French. When the Pharisees and the Herodians ask Jesus: "Is it permissible; to pay taxes to Caesar or not?", this is a trap, because the question itself presupposes that there is only one possible answer: 'yes' or 'no'. If Jesus answers 'yes', he will be in trouble with the Jews. If he answers 'no', he will be in trouble with the Romans who occupy the Jewish territory. So, Jesus avoids falling into the trap placed before him. He avoids the trap by moving back a little in order to get a better perspective on things; in order to have an overview of the question so that he can answer it in a truer and more life-giving way: "Give back to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God".

In life, we owe allegiance to many people. Let us take the example of our personal lives. One day, we were born. We believe that life is God's gift. And so we owe allegiance to God our Creator.

We received life as the fruit of the love of our parents who in their turn received the mission to care for us. And so we owe allegiance to our parents.

We were born in a country, a nation. And so we also owe allegiance to the laws and to the politicians who lead our nation.

We also owe allegiance to our conscience which it befalls us to enlighten and inform... and follow.

When we are asked: 'is it permissible to do this or not', we have to take on board all our allegiances, But they are not all to be placed on the same level. Our allegiance to God comes first and should inform all the others. All our other allegiances have to respect our fundamental allegiance to God. As I said earlier, very often we experience that situations in life do not have 'yes' or 'no', 'black' or 'white' answers.

Let us take two examples. First, let us imagine that we are living in a country where the death penalty is still practised. Our allegiance to God creator and giver of life should inform our conscience and help us to answer the question: "Is it permissible to condemn someone to death or not?" The Rule of St Benedict can help us to take some altitude in regard to such a question. For St Benedict a punishment imposed on a monk who has committed a fault is never a vengeance, a sort of "eye for eye, tooth for tooth" but a means to help him repent and engage himself in a process of healing. Let us come back to the death penalty. In presence of the culprit of a very grave offence, our first duty is obviously to protect society from any relapse, but then the life giving question to ask is: How can healing be brought to the culprit who is sick? In the

presence of offenders, the question is not: Have we to close our eyes to their crimes, or have we to condemn them to death? The true and life-giving question we have to ask is: how can we guide them on the path to healing and full recovery which cannot but include some reparation? And so, the question: 'Is it permissible to condemn someone to death or not' can be also a trap.

Let us take another example which concerns all of us here and now. Suppose someone asks us: Is it permissible to cheat a little with our tax declarations or not? If we answer 'yes' or 'no', in both cases, we are beside the point. Why? Because in so doing we place ourselves at the centre of the stage – me and my personal interests, me and my own ideology – when what should guide our reflection is the common good. Our personal interest has to be set aside and the common good taken into consideration. The question: 'Is it permissible to cheat a little with our tax declaration or not' is also a trap.

The synod on synodality which is now taking place in Rome is also a reminder that the question "Is it possible to do this nor not?" is not a life-giving question. Let us remember what happened during the Synod on the family a few years ago. Many were reducing the synod to one question: 'Is it permissible to give access to the sacraments to divorced, separated and remarried people or not?' The synod was divided in two, between those who were ready to answer 'yes' and those who were ready to answer 'no', until the moment when a breakthrough occurred thanks to an overflow inspired by Thomas Aquinas: Because of the immense variety of situations and circumstances people found themselves in, Aquina's teaching that no general rule could apply in every situation allowed the synod to agree on the need for a case-by-case discernment. There was no need to change the Church's law, only how it was applied.

Today is Mission Sunday. Each one of us is called to be a missionary, not only those who left their country in order to go and preach the gospel in a far-away land. By virtue of our baptism, we are called to bear witness to Jesus and to do this more by our lives than by our words. To have a missionary spirit, a missionary mind and a missionary heart is not to tell others what to do and what not to do, what is permissible and what is not. To have a missionary spirit, a missionary mind and a missionary heart is to bring the Spirit of the Gospel to bear on all the situations of life. Love and mercy must prevail over rules and regulations. We have to listen to others before speaking to them, before being able to help them to bring God into the complex situations in which people find themselves. The point is not to tell people what is permissible and what is not, but to help them discern what is the gospel way, what is the Lord's will in each situation in life.

Let us ask the Lord, for ourselves and for all those who are gathered together in Rome for the Synod on synodality, for a fresh out-pouring of the Holy Spirit so that we may discern how to pose the right questions and how to answer them in a life-giving way!