

August 3, 2008

The Sunday before Transfiguration

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

Among the features that make up the "teaching style" of our Savior, one of the more notable is His refusal to let His hearers and interlocutors define the terms of discussion. It is one of the ways in which He makes it clear that the Gospel is more than simply an answer to a human question. The Good News eludes all attempts to restrict it to a human concern. Jesus sees to this.

For example, when a speculative point is raised, He occasionally turns the inquiry into an exhortation. We observe, for instance, Jesus' response to the query, "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of God?" Instead of a straightforward reply, He admonishes the disciples to become as little children (Matthew 18:2-4). There is a second level of irony in this answer--namely, little children do not ask such questions. Their query, that is to say, was prompted by the non-childlike ambitions of those who posed it (cf. Luke 9:46).

On receiving a purely conjectural question, Jesus sometimes uses it as the occasion to give a very practical admonition. For instance, asked about *how many* will be saved, He offers very useful counsel about *how* to be saved (Luke 13:23-24).

Our Lord frequently responds to a question by posing a counter-question. In some cases the latter device is simply rhetorical. For instance, when asked if it is "lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any reason," He appeals to Holy Scripture by employing an interrogative form: "Have you not read . . .?" (Matthew 19:3-4; cf. Luke 6:2-3). Likewise, when Nicodemus inquires, "How can these things be?" Jesus challenges him, "Are you a teacher in Israel and do not know these things?" (John 3:9-10).

On other occasions, the Lord's counter-question is a direct foil to block a questioner's malicious intent (cf. Luke 11:53-54). Thus, when His enemies inquire by what authority He does "these things" (cleansing the Temple, withering a fig tree, and so forth), He declines to answer until the questioners should answer His counter-question about the authority of John the Baptist (Mark 11:28-30).

Sometimes the Lord's counter-question actually alters the course and raises the level of the conversation. The most dramatic example of this phenomenon, I suppose, is the incident involving "spies who pretended to be righteous, that they might seize on His words, in order to deliver Him to the power and the authority of the governor." In hopes of attaining this goal, they ask Jesus, "Is it lawful for us to pay taxes to Caesar or not?" (Luke 20:20-26)

The questioners here feel they can hardly fail: If the answer is yes, then Jesus will be perceived as taking the side of the Roman overlord. If the answer is no, then He is subject to arrest as a revolutionary.

The Lord recognizes the intent of their question, which is about as subtle as Mount McKinley. He requests the questioners to show the proper coin of the tax. This request accomplishes two things: First, it suggests that Jesus Himself does not have such a coin (cf. Matthew 17:24-27). Second, it proves that the questioners *do* have such a coin, thus demonstrating their hypocrisy in initiating the interrogation. If Jesus were interested in simply putting these hypocrites to shame, the entire discussion could reasonably end right here.

It is at this point, however, that Jesus asks His counter-question: "Whose image and inscription does it have?" The image on the coin is, in fact, essential to the discussion, and this in two ways: First, the emperor's image on the coin is what renders it objectionable: It violates the prohibition against images. Second, the image indicates the coin's basic significance: It belongs to Caesar. That is to say, Jesus does not evade the question about paying taxes to Caesar; He answers it, and the answer is yes!

At the same time, however, the Lord elevates the discussion above the limits of the original question. He uses the latter to distinguish between the relative and legitimate claims of the State and the absolute claims of God. This dominical distinction, which was always at least implicit in the Prophets, thus provides a practical norm in the Christian life. While remaining radically faithful to God, Christians are to support and give their allegiance to the government Providence has placed over them. The debt they owe to the State is not optional. Sharing in the economic and political benefits the State provides, they are under a stern moral obligation to bolster, maintain, and provide for it.

This important theological teaching comes by way of a dialectical response to a malicious question. A misshapen mouse gives birth to a perfectly formed elephant.

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