WE ARE GOD’S COINAGE

One of my powerful memories is from the time I met some of Mother Theresa’s sisters in Honduras. I was visiting an old friend who was at the time a missionary priest in that very poor country exactly twenty five years ago. On our way to his remote parish from the airport where he had picked me up in one of Honduras’ big cities, we stopped in a little dusty town named Santa Rosa. We visited two orphanages that day. The first, operated by some Franciscan nuns, was a beautiful place – neat and tidy. The children there were healthy looking and very much full of energy. I remember thinking that kids like these could be found back in Ohio – maybe with a little lighter complexion. They were the lucky children.

We ate lunch at the Franciscan orphanage and then set off for the second one. There we met four sisters of Mother Theresa’s order, known as the Missionary Sisters of Charity. In keeping with her community’s practice of serving the poorest of the poor, this orphanage housed only children who were severely mentally challenged – most of them because they were malnourished in infancy. In other words, their parents were somehow not able to get enough food for them when they were newborns. Still, some of these kids were able to smile and even to hug. Regardless of their condition, the love which the sisters lavished on these girls and boys was heartwarming and heroic. It was easy to believe that that the orphans here were just as beautiful as the orphans at the other place. Certainly the nuns gave witness to the God-given human dignity of their precious little ones.

It was here, after a long emotional visit, that we celebrated Mass. My friend suggested I preside since the common language of the Missionary Sisters of Charity is English. My Spanish was not so good and so this was the only Mass I presided at during my several weeks stay in Honduras. I concelebrated the others. It was June 6, the Feast of St. Norbert, my Dad’s name-sake. I will always remember every detail about that Mass and about that day – especially how close I felt to God present in the Eucharist after I felt so close to him in the children.

In today’s gospel (from St. Matthew), Jesus is asked if it is lawful for a good Jew to pay taxes. This was a burning question in the time of Christ because the Jews were ruled over by the Romans and many Jewish leaders believed that it was a sin to pay taxes to a pagan ruler. The Roman Emperor, who claimed to be divine, had no right to tribute from the people who believed in the one true God (as the argument went). Specifically, the tax in question here is the census tax which was a head tax that everyone from their early teen years until they were 65 had to pay – and few lived to 65 in those days! This tax could be paid by one coin, the denarius, which was
the approximate equivalent of a day’s wages. The denarius had the image of the current emperor, Tiberius, stamped on it. To pay such a tax with such a coin irked the Jews.

So a group of Jesus’ enemies try to trap him by asking him if it is o.k. to pay the census tax. If Jesus says it’s not right to pay it, he could be denounced to the Romans as a revolutionary and be arrested. If he says it is o.k. to pay it, he will fall out of favor with his Jewish followers. Of course, Jesus is too clever for these characters. He gives a wise answer which is a guide to this day perhaps for how Christians should relate to their country and its government.

Jesus asks to see the denarius, the coin that pays the tax. He notes that the image of the Emperor is on the coin and he says: “Repay to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God.” In saying this, the Lord is teaching his hearers and all Christians that we necessarily belong to a country and its culture and we owe something to that country. But he is also saying that we belong first and foremost to God. What belongs to God is really EVERYTHING! The Emperor’s image is stamped on his coin (as our past presidents’ images are stamped on our coins) and Jesus seems to be saying that the Emperor and any government have the right to taxes. But the image of God is stamped on our souls and we are his and ultimately his alone. We derive all of our human rights and our dignity from being made in God’s image. No one, no country, no government has anywhere near the hold on us that God has.

October is Respect Life Month. All human life is God’s coinage. And each human life is worth more than all the wealth in the universe. As our church teaches, he is especially close to all his lowly ones – including the children, born and unborn, no matter what their condition. The orphans of Santa Rosa made such an impression on me that since that day I have always felt the special presence of Christ in his special ones – whether children or adults whom he has given to us to tug at our heart strings. I remember reflecting on the events of that day later in the evening about how God is present also in me in a way that I had not acknowledged before. The true God lived in me – sinner though I am.

Before we left Santa Rosa on that June 6, 1989, we made a visit to its cathedral where we met its bishop. The church was alarmingly simple and yet strikingly beautiful, as so many Catholic churches are – and perhaps especially in that part of the world. My prayer there was as pure as any I have ever experienced. And I noticed other folks praying so earnestly there too. But it is not so different in any church in the world where Christ is present in the Eucharist and in his people. Certainly I have had countless similar opportunities to meet God in his house – including here in our stunning church. On the night of its dedication on that beautiful evening of June 29, 2011, a woman of our parish said to me afterwards: “you know, Father, this will be a place of conversion.” How beautifully true that has been! I have seen it happen over and over.

Most recently, I met a young man who is a freshman at Otterbein and who came to Mass one Sunday a few weeks ago and got hooked. He was powerfully set up for this experience, as he explained to me, by his visits to churches along the Pacific coast of Mexico where he and his
family have gone on vacation for the last fifteen years. For almost all of those years, they have stayed for a month or more at Christmas time in their camper on the beach just outside an impoverished little town named La Ticla which happens also to be a prime surfing location. As this young man told me, it was here that he “learned Spanish, made lifelong friends, and found God.” He became friends of almost every boy in the town who were his age. They are all “devout Catholics” (he declared) and they introduced him to the church that was the center of the village’s life. This church is, as he said, “dilapidated … [with an] altar, a few benches, dirt floor, and a whole lot of sunlight.” His account of this ramshackle church, which made a deep impression on him, reminded me of my visit to Santa Rosa in Honduras. This young man is now in the RCIA process here at St. Paul’s.

He has continued to pray in our church a couple of evenings every week. And one of the unexpected joyful things that has happened to him on some of these occasions has been the sound of our new organ which Mr. John Bryan, our Music Director, has been practicing. I have no doubt that this magnificent instrument that we dedicated just now will add to the special character of this space and will lead even more people to deeper faith and love and, yes, deeper conversion to Christ – all made possible by your unbelievable generosity.

There is a word to describe the sense of God’s presence, whether in his holy temple or in his holy people. That word is “numinous.” Here in this church, which with the dedication of the organ, is (in a sense) close to being finished, we will continuously find God. But may we never forget that we also find the numinous out there whenever we encounter anyone made in his image and likeness – anyone no matter what they look like or what their physical, socio-economic, or spiritual condition! The Otterbein student found the divine in the dirt-floor church and in the dirt-poor guys whom he calls his “brothers.” For we all belong to God and to each other forever. We have his image stamped on us. As Jesus teaches us today in the Gospel of St. Matthew, we are God’s coinage. If we are human, we are also divine through the precious currency of grace – which is everywhere. .