We own possessions, but at times they own us. Some hobbies demand the extensive purchase of accessories. Some collectibles keep expanding. If we run out of storage space, we buy more storage so we can possess more things. Sometimes we buy new things simply because we can't find the same ones we have inside our overstuffed closets.

Although we enjoy spending, we also like getting things free. We want free information online and free spaces to park a car.

When someone else wants some of what we have, we resist because we think it's ours and sharing threatens who we are and what we achieve. Taxes make people suspicious. We don't want to pay them, but we do want roads, schools, and parks. It's complicated.

In Jesus' day, under the Roman Empire, people had to pay a tax, roughly one day's pay per year. The Pharisees and Herodians probably knew the value of paying taxes and whatever controversies surrounded them. They approached Jesus with a gotcha question. To embarrass someone in public discourse was a first-century equivalent to a political attack ad. They hoped to pry followers away from Jesus and diminish his power. They asked the trick question, "Is it lawful to pay the census tax to Caesar or not?"

The answer depended on which law they meant. If the law of the land was to pay the tax, then it was lawful to do so. But if the law of God was to oppose corruption, then maybe it was lawful not to. When someone prosecutes a case, you may hear the demand, "Give me a simple yes or no to this question." Then comes a question that defies giving a simple yes or no. Inside this predicament, Jesus finessed his reply. He asked his adversaries to produce a coin. They carried the tax they owed right in their pocket; he asked them to take a closer look. They owned the coin, but the coin wasn't theirs. The coin belonged to the man whose image it bore: Caesar. They weren't giving up something they owned, but something they owed.

Then Jesus spun the message. If we owe what bears the image of Caesar to Caesar, then surely we owe what bears the image of God to God. That would be our very own lives. This passage isn't so much about the separation of Church and State, but about the unity of responsibilities in society. Duties to Church and State are, so to speak, two sides of the same coin. We owe something to each.

Today is the 100th anniversary of World Mission Sunday, when every Catholic Church takes up a second collection to help underwrite missionary life where priests live, where sisters live, where children are catechized, where formation and pastoral work can happen, and where Mass can be celebrated, often for the first time. The collection is one of many ways we use one side of the coin to support the other, in hopes that the State where the Church enters will not thwart its spread.

So, where do we spend our coins, and where do we spend our time? When do we clutch our coins and when do we tame our time? Family, friends, and strangers may not have their image on our coins, but they do have their image on our time and our heart. It's important to repay what we owe.