

- For as long as there have been people in the world, one thing has surely been true. *Imagine the first time a man or a woman leaned down to a pool of water to drink... and was startled by the sight. It was an image ~ an image of what seemed to be another, who turned out to be the self.* We are intrigued by and absorbed with *our own image*. We wonder how others see us, and about what kind of image they have of us.
- Show any of us a *group picture* we are part of, and our eyes zero in on our own image in the photo. *How do we look*, we wonder. What we really are wondering, is how we look to others. *How-we-imagine-we-look* then shapes how we see ourselves. Or, to put it another way, how we see ourselves is so often shaped by *how-we-imagine-we-look* to others. This is what we mean by 'self-image.' *Self-images can be liberating. But they can also be limiting. This is why having a spiritually proper self-image is so important.*
- An *image* is a representation or a picture of something. *An image captures something characteristic of what it represents.* This is why some of the first words in Genesis are so profound: "God said, 'Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness...'"<sup>1</sup> With reflection, we see this is not about outward appearance, but instead has to do with the essential structure of our being. This image is reflected in the fact that *we are personal beings who have a spiritual nature; that we are social; that we notice and value beauty, goodness and truth; and that we communicate such ideas with insight. For these are all attributes of God!* It is these attributes, rather than the shape of our bodies, that mark us as made in the image of God. And being in God's image comes before any image we have of ourselves. *God's image is always liberating, and never limiting.*
- *This insight fits well with* our recent reflection on Paul's words about *how God is at work within us, and among us*. Choosing to believe that God is at work within and among us, we can appreciate Paul's later words in

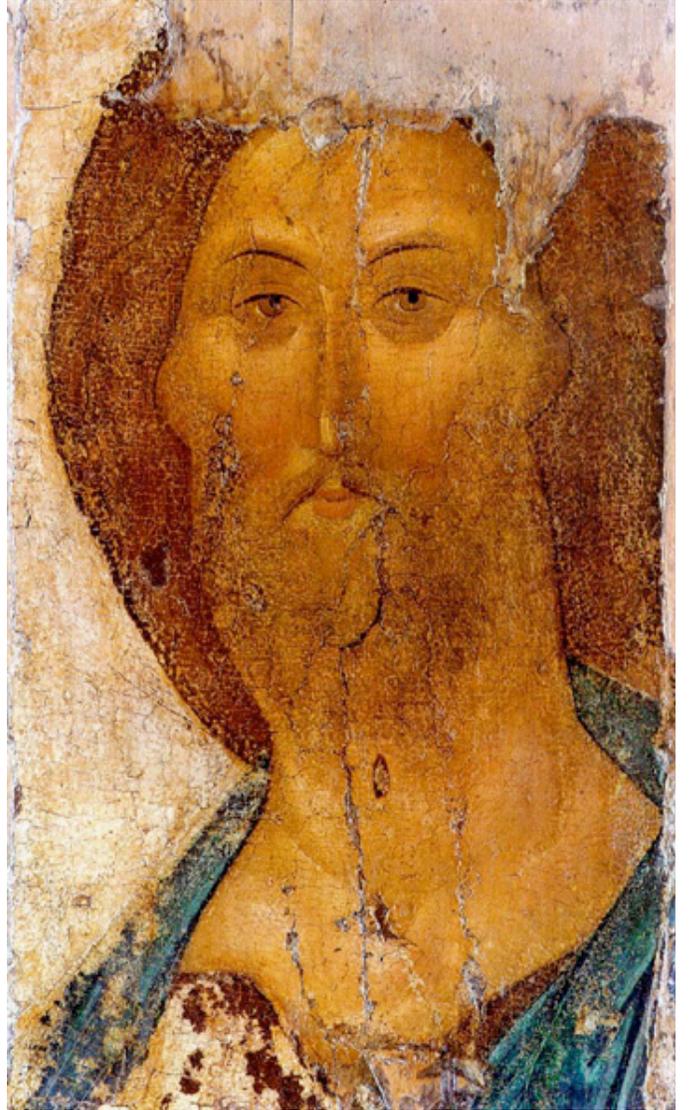
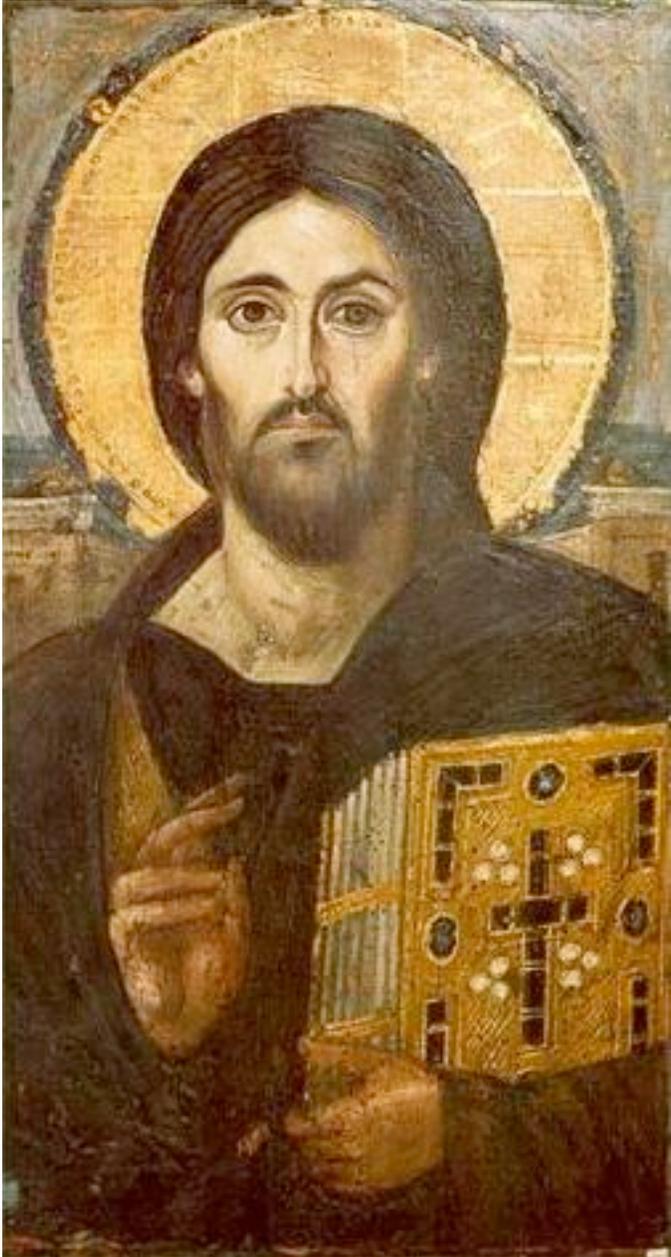
Philippians, to this effect: "I can do all things through him who strengthens me." If God is at work within us, *then we can* do all that God wants us to engage, and accomplish. In other words, we can do all that God desires for us through God's enabling grace. And we can trust in God's enabling grace because we are created in God's image, and are being restored to God's likeness.<sup>2</sup> (pause)

- Today we find Jesus teaching in the Temple in the days before his last supper with the disciples - shortly before his arrest. The Pharisees who come to him have much in common with him. They credit him with being sincere; with teaching the way of God in accordance with truth; and for showing deference to no one except God. Yet, though these are virtues valued by the Pharisees *themselves*, they come to entrap him. Ironically, we can sometimes be *least tolerant* of those who are like us!
- "Tell us," they ask, "what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?" This is a question with several layers. On the face of it, he could hardly say no. Living in a territory controlled by Caesar, he and they are bound by Roman law. After becoming a Roman province in 6 A.D., the Roman head-tax or census tax became a requirement in Judea. And yet, if Jesus says yes, he would appear to believe the Romans had been permitted to exercise authority by God, and were ultimately an extension of God's sovereignty.
- How then does Jesus handle the question? He goes straight to the heart of the matter. He asks them to show him the coin used for the tax. He knows, just as they know, that *only* Roman coins can be used to pay Caesar's tax. Yet, these same coins are *forbidden* in the inner part of the Temple. It was precisely for this reason that the money-changers set up their tables on the periphery - *the very same tables* Jesus had provocatively turned over, just a short time before. Coins from other realms and kingdoms often bore idolatrous images and words, and represented things that competed with

God's sovereign authority. Given all this, the Pharisees act in an ironic way. For in trying to trap Jesus, they bring just such a coin into the holy place of God!

- Looking at the coin, he asks them, "Whose head is this, and whose title?" The face, of course, is that of Tiberius Caesar. And the title calls him, 'august son of the divine Augustus, high priest or bridge between God and men.'
- But, instead, the Pharisees simply say, "It's the emperor's." Jesus then responds to them with an inescapable truth, a truth *just as challenging for us* as it was for them. He says, "Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's." The emperor had a *rightful claim* to that over which he was sovereign. This began with the coins that bore his image and likeness, and extended to everything over which he had shaping power and authority. This principle was as easy to recognize then as it is today. We are not surprised to find our government exercise claim and control over all that bears its image, whether that be coins and currency, passports, flags or uniformed officers.
- But the same principle applies to what can seem more abstract, as well. Whether we choose to do so or not, we can recognize what the Pharisees recognized. If both the Roman emperor *then*, and the United States government *now*, can exercise such a rightful claim over what bears their images, *what about God? What about God's rightful claim to that over which God is sovereign? God's claim begins with what bears God's image and likeness, and extends to everything over which God has shaping power and authority.* Something happens when we acknowledge we have been 'fearfully and wonderfully made,' in God's image and likeness. We then recognize God's sweeping claim over *all that we are, all that we have, and all that we do.* And by recognizing this, *we must begin to live differently!*

- But there is a deceptively attractive alternative. It's much easier *instead* to see ourselves as being *in the image of other people...* of people we find on magazine covers, people idolized in movies and in sports, and people famous in history. We can identify ourselves with our images of these people. At first, this seems less costly compared to identifying with the divine image. For seeking to be in the image of other people can seem less demanding. But actually, the cost is rather high. The cost of identifying with anything less than the image of God is to risk something great. It is to risk not being transformed into the glory of God's own image, which is to become a human person who is fully alive.<sup>3</sup> And yet, this is precisely what Jesus—*as the image of God*—came to give all of us. He came to give us the opportunity to flourish in the fullness of being human. To live in the image of God is to live in Jesus. It is to live into the fullness of life, as we discover more and more ways that God is at work within us.<sup>4</sup>



(left:) Icon of Christ Pantocrator (Christ, Ruler of All) from the 500's or 600's A.D.

(right:) Icon of Christ the Savior, Rublev, ca 1410.

### Matthew 22:15-22

The Pharisees went and plotted to entrap Jesus in what he said. So they sent their disciples to him, along with the Herodians, saying, “Teacher, we know that you are sincere, and teach the way of God in accordance with truth, and show deference to no one; for you do not regard people with partiality. Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?” But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, “Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites? Show me the coin used for the tax.” And they brought him a denarius. Then he said to them, “Whose head is this, and whose title?” They answered, “The emperor’s.” Then he said to them, “Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s.” When they heard this, they were amazed; and they left him and went away.

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#### Notes:

<sup>1</sup> See Genesis 1:26-27.

<sup>2</sup> Though the words, “image” and “likeness,” may simply be a result of Hebrew poetic parallelism, they have been interpreted as having a distinguishable significance in subsequent Christian reflection. The broader Catholic tradition, including Anglicanism, understands our likeness with God as something that was lost in the Fall, but that all human beings retain some semblance of the image of God (the *imago dei*). This understanding informs our baptismal commitment to respect the dignity of every human being.

<sup>3</sup> Behind this statement is the wonderful saying from St. Irenaeus (ca130-202 A.D.): “The glory of God is the human person fully alive.”

<sup>4</sup> Once again, I refer to Paul’s stirring encouragement in Philippians 2:13 (see it in context).