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'Whose image is this?'

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"Whose image is this?" Mark 12:16

Historians of the political cartoon note that the first caricatures -- distorted images of authority figures -- were the result of the wearing down through use of the images on official coins. Even the emperor lost his chin or had his nose flattened after being rubbed in a thousand transactions. Have a good laugh at the king's expense, but trust his power to provide for your every need. The real imprint of authority was not on the money but on the people who were required to use it. Culture and its many interlocking systems brand us all with the imperial image. Human worth is measured in paper and metal, or in bytes: a day's wage, a meal, a mortgage, an inheritance.

Jesus is confronted about taxes and the loyalty they imply. He takes the system for what it is, an artificial way to exchange goods and services by symbols. Let those who use it and benefit from it pay for it. But it is separate from genuine worth. We are first made in the image and likeness of God. Our true worth is priceless. Human dignity is tied to our relationship with God and our destiny in God.

Jesus is described as the icon of God, the visible face of the invisible Mystery. Baptism into his life ought to mean we share a family resemblance with him. But this apparently takes time to surface because we are also branded by the culture that shapes us, by the story it whispers into our senses from childhood, about what is desirable, beautiful, true, normal and acceptable. We must fight our way free of its false images and empty promises. Another economy exists in the webs of friendship and table fellowship, hospitality and even shared privation so that all have enough instead of a few having too much. Each day is sufficient unto itself with both suffering and joy, need and gift, for those who belong to the family of God.

[These reflections (and sketches) by Pat Marrin are inspired by the day's scripture readings [1].]

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[1] http://www.usccb.org/nab/today.shtml