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THE DENARIUS AND THE PILGRIM: What Future Are We Building?

Managing the present for the wellbeing of future generations.





Letter from the Editor

Welcome to the first issue

Some people spend their lives building a career. Others spend their lives building a house. Some devote their years to raising a family, a business, or a reputation. I have spent a good part of my life asking questions.

Questions about God. Questions about people. Questions about the societies we build and the ones we destroy. Questions about truth, freedom, responsibility, and purpose.

For more than twenty-seven years I have lived among different cultures, languages, and ways of understanding the world.

I have learned that many answers that seemed indisputable change when one crosses a border. What remains is the human need to find meaning.

This magazine is born precisely from that search.

It does not pretend to be a pulpit. Nor a political platform. Much less a refuge for repeating religious or ideological slogans. We live in a strange age.

We have access to more information than any previous generation and yet it seems we understand less and less the person who thinks differently.

We have learned to speak louder, but not necessarily to listen better. For that reason, these pages will be dedicated to something I consider fundamental: thinking.

Thinking from faith. Thinking from experience. Thinking from responsibility. Thinking without fear.

I deeply believe that the Christian faith was not designed to switch off the mind, but to illuminate it. Not to produce mechanical followers, but disciples capable of discernment.

Not to escape reality, but to live within it with hope and purpose.

Alejandro del Zotto

Editor

We are pilgrims passing through, but stewards while we walk.

The Denarius and the Pilgrim

By Alejandro del Zotto

For the first time in so many years of my life, I needed to go vote. Suddenly I realized it was the last day of early voting, something that is used in the United States. I asked my wife if she wanted to go after work, and she said… of course.

Without wasting time, we got home from work, dropped our things, and went to vote at the place that corresponds to us. So, while we waited in line to vote, I was thinking about the commitment of every person around me. I saw people of all ages. Contrary to what the outside world thinks, the Americans are free to vote and free not to vote if they don't want to. But many do vote and exercise their right to have an opinion.

What catches my attention about this society is that, beyond the fights in the media, the people yesterday at the entrance of the library, were defending different positions, and nobody attacked anybody, nobody looked at each other with contempt.

They were within arm's reach of holding hands. That does not happen in many places. People with signs, even clothes, with the names of the candidates. Rivals in the contest, all together with one single mission. That people vote, and that the best one wins.

The country that many call… "the diabolical country" has something that many want to explain from the outside, and you can't. It is evident that in a certain way it has overcome many obstacles and still has many obstacles to overcome, but it surprises, in a certain way, much older societies that have not gotten through many of our difficulties so easily.

Different ways of thinking do not make different enemies.

I speak of "we" because we have spent more than 27 years inside this society. We too, as immigrants, have gone through many obstacles inside a society that seems to have a petty mind, at least in appearance, and that is not looking to open its doors to new citizens by choice.

What is interesting is that within the whole of American society there is a mixture that does not manage to be the Argentine or Brazilian crucible. They are units that have come together but have not blended.

That is why I mention there is so much social noise.

But they have achieved something particularly interesting.

Freedom of thought, whether religious or social, should not be an exception.

Going back to the moment of the vote, we were, without realizing it, experiencing what so many societies long for so deeply.

Mature societies that can have diversity without confrontation. A mature society knows that everything balances a little to each side from time to time.

This moment resonated inside me with something I always considered necessary. To be able to be a Christian and act accordingly.

Without forcing anyone to follow me out of obligation. The idea of being able to encourage others to walk beside you without feeling obliged to do so.

Sadly, events are happening in different places that make us think, or at least make me think, whether it is good or bad to share without sharing.

How can you be tolerant with intolerant people?

You give them shelter because they have nowhere to protect themselves from the weather, and two days later they take your house.

This view does not come from a great imagination. It is what many citizens in countries that believed themselves morally better have done for many years, and now they don't know how to continue the story they began to draw.

They were left without a script.

There are questions that are born to be answered. And there are others that are born to set traps. The one they asked Jesus in Matthew 22 belongs to the second category.

Certain societies are incorporated into others and ask for room to breathe. But the most discordant thing is that the societies that ask for air are the ones that suffocate different thought.

They are the ones that repress the individuals who want to walk in directions different from

the ones their leader's trace.

Something similar to what once happened in a city of the Middle East. If Jesus walked in what is today called the Middle East…

The Pharisees and the Herodians approached. Two groups that hated each other, but that joined for one same goal: to make him fall. They asked him:

"Is it lawful to pay tribute to Caesar or not?"

It was a perfect trap. If Jesus said "yes," he lost the people, who hated the Roman yoke. If he said "no," they accused him of rebellion against the empire. It was the classic binary dilemma that tries to squeeze truth into a political label.

Jesus did not fall. He asked them for a coin. A denarius. And he asked them a question that still echoes today: "Whose image and inscription is this?"

The weight of a coin

To understand the magnitude of this moment, we need to dust off the text. The denarius was not just any coin. It carried the effigy of Tiberius Caesar and an inscription that declared him "son of the divine Augustus."

For a devout Jew, touching that coin was an affront. It was the symbol of a brutal occupation, of an empire that believed itself owner of the world and demanded worship. The answer they gave was obvious: "Caesar's."

Jesus then spoke the phrase that has baffled theologians, kings, and preachers for centuries:

"Give, then, to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's."

Caesar has his sphere. The coin has his image. But the human being has another.

You and I do not carry the image of an emperor. We carry the image of God (Genesis 1:27). That is why Jesus' phrase is not a call to political indifference, but a limit on power.

Caesar can demand taxes, he can demand order, he can demand laws.

But when Caesar pretends to take ownership of the conscience, the life, and the purpose of the human being, there he runs into a wall: that image is not negotiable.

The modern trap: "God is in control"

We live in times when many Christians, faced with the rot of politics, decide to wash their hands. They repeat phrases like: "God is in control," "It is God's timing," or "I don't get into politics because I am a pilgrim."

And they are right about one thing: we are pilgrims. This world is not our home. But be careful, because there is a huge difference between being a pilgrim and being a fugitive.

The fugitive runs because nothing matters to him. The tourist consumes without committing. But the pilgrim, although he is just passing through, administers what was entrusted to him while he passes.

There is a huge difference between being a pilgrim and being a fugitive.

"Sola Scriptura" misunderstood can make us sterile. If we use the Bible only to lock ourselves into a spiritual asceticism, we end up being preachers who do not see the pain of our neighbor. But when Scripture illuminates' history, we understand that God has always used men and women to transform reality.

In the coming elections in Tennessee, as anywhere in the world, Christians face a decision.

Some refuse to vote. Others vote as if politics were salvation. Both extremes are dangerous.

Not voting out of prudence, because the system is fraudulent or because the options are unworthy, is a legitimate decision. But using God as an alibi to justify apathy is something else.

Because the Christian has a commitment to life. And that commitment includes stewardship of the tools the system gives you.

For the one who has no education, for the one who has no power, for the one who has always been a passive subject of other people's decisions, the vote is sometimes the only instrument of agency he has. Despising it can be a luxury of those who have other powers.

Who is your Caesar?

The Caesar of your life is not only a politician on a ballot. He is any system that demands the image that belongs only to God. He is the institution that tells you you are worth nothing because you have no degrees. He is the job that dehumanizes you. He is the economy that steals the fruit of your sweat. He is the church that measures your worth by the seats you fill.

Caesar keeps his coin. You belong to another Kingdom. But that does not exempt you from your responsibility to the earthly city. As Jeremiah said to the exiles: "Seek the welfare of the city… for in its welfare you will have welfare."

God is in control, yes. But God's control does not cancel your responsibility. Esther understood this when Mordecai said to her: "And who knows whether you have come to the kingdom for such a time as this?"

We are thinking matter. We are not animals that only evolve, nor automatons waiting for someone else to make the decisions for them. We carry the image of God. And that image obliges us to be awake, to discern the times, and to use what we have in our hands to protect the life and the dignity of the one who has no voice.

The exercise of the mind does not always lead us to the answer. In this case it is clear that we are going to need to exercise our mental muscle to get past this obstacle where we are standing. How to aspire to full freedom, including even those who do not wish to be tolerant but want to be tolerated.

Give to Caesar what is Caesar's. But never, under any circumstances, hand over to Caesar what is God's.

In this whole story there is a theme we don't want to address. That we don't want to mention and that many wish to hide.

For many, there will have to be a change. Necessary, and sadly it will come with pain, because it hurts to lose something. But if they want to be included, they will have to give something in return.

This theme, which shows civic exercise, was the excuse to expose a reality. What stayed hidden from me is how to be integrated without disintegrating diversity.

Society does not have to adapt to the immigrant. Nor should it feel attacked. I believe the mistake was not setting the rules clearly when receiving a new member into the family.

Being received has always implied responsibilities. The one who receives people into a house is responsible for making it clear that being accepted would also imply a mental sacrifice on the part of the refugee. Movements cannot have maternal guidelines. The state must provide legal clarity from the beginning. Some societies need to be informed; welcoming them is not enough.

Like some Americans used to say, “my way or the highway” in this case, it was probably an unavoidable statement.

Something nobody wants to accept.

The mistake was receiving people without clearly explaining what the rules of coexistence were, the rights, and also the responsibilities that came with that welcome. Not informing them about their responsibilities, about the rules of civility of the West, was a materialist mistake.

One last thing, so that nothing is misunderstood. This is not a magazine of entertainment, nor of philosophical thought. It is a magazine that is not afraid to say what has to be said.

The call to be inclusive is real, and I have defended it here. But it can never keep the Christian from what he is called to do: to persevere, until the end, in the faith that was given to him. In the United States, in Europe, in Africa, in Asia, the pressure is the same.

Open your door, yes. Walk beside the one who thinks differently, yes. But never hand over to Caesar what belongs to God.

We are pilgrims passing through, but stewards while we walk.

Scripture References (in order of appearance)

Matthew 22:15-22 (Mark 12:13-17; Luke 20:20-26): the question about the tribute and the denarius

Genesis 1:27: “We carry the image of God”

Hebrews 11:13 and 1 Peter 2:11: “We are pilgrims. This world is not our home”

1 Corinthians 4:1-2: the pilgrim “administers what was entrusted to him”

Philippians 3:20 and John 18:36: “You belong to another Kingdom”

Jeremiah 29:7: “Seek the welfare of the city”

Esther 4:14: “For such a time as this”

1 Chronicles 12:32 and Matthew 16:3: “To discern the times”

Proverbs 31:8 → Proverbs 31:8: “The one who has no voice”

Hebrews 13:2 and Romans 12:13: “Open your door”

Matthew 24:13: “To persevere, until the end”

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The conversation does not end in these pages, If you seek to continue discerning the times, thinking from faith, and engaging with truth without fear, step beyond this issue.

Read ongoing essays, reflections, and commentaries at the digital home of The Pilgrim.

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