October 22, 2017
29th Sunday of Ordinary Time:
“Decoding Today’s Language and Defending Our Beliefs”
Deacon Dave Snyder

Reading 1 Isaiah 45:1, 4-6
Thus says the LORD to his anointed, Cyrus, whose right hand I grasp, subduing nations before him, and making kings run in his service, opening doors before him and leaving the gates unbarred: For the sake of Jacob, my servant, of Israel, my chosen one, I have called you by your name, giving you a title, though you knew me not. I am the LORD and there is no other, there is no God besides me. It is I who arm you, though you know me not, so that toward the rising and the setting of the sun people may know that there is none besides me. I am the LORD, there is no other.

Reading 2 1 Thes 1:1-5B
Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy to the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: grace to you and peace. We give thanks to God always for all of you, remembering you in our prayers, unceasingly calling to mind your work of faith and labor of love and endurance in hope of our Lord Jesus Christ, before our God and Father, knowing, brothers and sisters loved by God, how you were chosen. For our gospel did not come to you in word alone, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with much conviction.

Gospel Matthew 22:15-21
The Pharisees went off and plotted how they might entrap Jesus in speech. They sent their disciples to him, with the Herodians, saying, “Teacher, we know that you are a truthful man and that you teach the way of God in accordance with the truth. And you are not concerned with anyone's opinion, for you do not regard a person's status. Tell us, then, what is your opinion: Is it lawful to pay the census tax to Caesar or not?” Knowing their malice, Jesus said, “Why are you testing me, you hypocrites? Show me the coin that pays the census tax.” Then they handed him the Roman coin. He said to them, “Whose image is this and whose inscription?” They replied, “Caesar's.” At that he said to them, “Then repay to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God.”

HOMILY
One of the cable channels plays the movie “A Christmas Story” for 24 hours straight every Christmas Eve and Day – many of you have probably seen it, over and over and over again. How many have seen the movie at least 10 times? You may remember that the story’s hero, Ralphie, scrupulously listens to a certain radio show to get a numerical message that can only be decoded by this “secret decoder ring” that he had to mail away for. We witness Ralphie’s suspense as he listens and writes down each number to be decoded, and as he imagines this decoded message to help make him a hero in the eyes of his family and others. And we can sympathize with him as his suspense turns to frustration when the secret message turns out to be an obvious commercial for the radio show’s sponsor, Ovaltine. At my workplace, whenever we get a confusing message from someone, especially from management, we kiddingly say, “Well, let’s take out our ‘secret decoder ring’ and figure out what this message is really saying.” As an interesting aside, one of those managers was at an earlier Mass and came over to me afterwards to have a “chat” with me.
Jesus did not need a “secret decoder ring” to know what the Pharisees and the Herodians were really doing in today’s Gospel story from Matthew. Jesus was in Jerusalem, teaching His disciples; the high priests, Pharisees and Sadducees were looking for ways to trap Him in His teachings. Matthew’s Gospel provides several examples of this, and today’s story had two very unlikely groups banding together for that purpose, very different in their beliefs but both very concerned about Jesus’ rising popularity and the effects it would have on their own futures. The Pharisees were religious loyalists, supporters of the Mosaic Law to every detail and even more – and they were staunchly opposed to Roman rule. The Herodians were political supporters of the Herodian reign – think Herod – and its mutual friendship with Rome. But their common purpose was to force Jesus into a dilemma, a catch-22 of sorts. After buttering Him up with all types of compliments – telling Him that He was truthful, not concerned with anyone’s opinion, and not taking into account a person’s status as to who He dined with or spoke with – they posed a question with only two choices, each yielding a very undesirable outcome. If Jesus sided with the tax, He would be labeled a fan of Rome and lose the support of many of His followers, who hated paying the tax. If Jesus denounced the tax, He would probably have been reported to the Roman authorities for trying to start a tax uprising – and the very cruel response of Rome to the last tax uprising a few decades earlier was undoubtedly still fresh in everyone’s memories. The Pharisees and Herodians believed that Jesus was trapped, but He knew how to respond, with an answer that was outside the box of their choices. In addition, He called them hypocrites – the Pharisees opposed the tax like everyone else, but still paid it and even had a tax coin to give Jesus for His response.

What parallels are there for us today? The setting of the movie “A Christmas Story” was in the 1950’s – certainly a time period different from today; words had specific meanings, and moral boundaries were arguably clearer. Many cultural and societal gains have been made since then, not to mention huge leaps in technology, but many meanings, many lines have been blurred – now some have been done on purpose to bring doubt and confusion, yet others have changed or blurred because of the tech advances and improvements, and new questions, new dilemmas have been raised. I hope that many of us might agree with that assessment without political discussions or arguments. But as a result of this blurring of words and meanings, it may seem to be very difficult to draw a dividing line between right from wrong anymore. It may seem like we are often challenged by our friends and family, by society, and by the media, to defend what we consider to be our beliefs, our morals, in many situations, including often-enough life-and-death ones. How do we answer, and what is our basis? How well-formed is our conscience to make decisions, and how was it formed? Was it formed by the swaying winds of society or a popular television or movie series? Or is it based on something more solid, like our faith? Sometimes it might even seem like getting the question that Jesus faced would be much simpler compared to some of the challenges which we face today. Why, even the term “absolute-truth” is challenged, and bigoted could mean almost anything, depending on who is saying it and the application. And then, there’s “choice” … “bias” … and the list goes on.

October is recognized by the Church as Respect Life Month. We believe that we are made in the image and likeness of God, so the Church has always taught that all human life is sacred from the very moment of conception until God calls us home. Our respect for life also includes those affected by war, violence of any sort, poverty and other societal ills. But, even Pope Francis has stressed the defense of unborn life as being closely linked to the defense of each and every other human right. And, remember that the Church’s position is strongly pro-life, it’s NOT anti-choice as the media and others insist. As for tech advances, note that for all the excitement promoted for embryonic stem-cell
research just a few years ago, it has fallen flat compared to the multitude of successful adult stem-cell applications. How about end-of-life decisions, immigration limits, and the recreational use of drugs – they are at the tip of the iceberg when it comes to ethical examples that challenge our way of thinking. When we include challenges in other areas, especially including sexuality and now gender, we may find ourselves very confused and unable to defend any of our beliefs and positions. We may find ourselves in situations like the question posed to Jesus, with choices that may seem to be lose-lose.

But … there is hope – much hope! God is there to help us! I think we each need some God-decoders – something which helps us to keep our focus on God when challenges are presented to us, when the questions get confusing, when the lines of morality seem distorted or blurred. Why God-decoders? When Jesus answered those who tried to trick Him, He said, “Repay to God what belongs to God.” Over the years, some have argued this line to justify separation of Church and state, and that the two should not interfere with each other, but what really belongs to God? *Everything* belongs to God, because *everything comes from God, everyone belongs to God*. So, what are these God-decoders? I would suggest that we start with the Bible and the Catechism, add in prayer, teachings of the Church, and regular use of the sacraments, to help develop a well-formed conscience. Then, when faced with a challenge, we can be much better prepared to meet it. Investigate it further if sufficient time. If an immediate decision is needed, say a prayer before deciding, try to carry a blessed rosary in your pocket and hold it if you can. Then, follow up later with some research, and correct your earlier decision if you need to. God will help us determine right from wrong, God will lessen the confusion for us, God does provide absolute truth, and God will give us the courage to stand up for that truth. God-decoders – every Christian should have them, don’t face life’s challenges without them!