

What Does Christ the King Mean for Us?

November 22, 2015

Solemnity of Our Lord Jesus Christ, King of the Universe
Readings: Daniel 7.13-14;
Revelation 1.5-8;
John 18.33b-37

By Rev. C. John McCloskey

In 1925 Pope Pius XI introduced the Feast of Christ the King in his encyclical *Quas primas*. An important part of that document was the pope's repetition of the point that the kingdom of Christ embraces the whole of mankind, not only at the end of time but also *now*, in the hearts of all women and men:

Since the Ascension God's plan has entered into its fulfillment. We are already at "the last hour." "Already the final age of the world is with us, and the renewal of the world is irrevocably under way; it is even now anticipated in a certain real way, for the Church on earth is endowed already with a sanctity that is real but imperfect." Christ's kingdom already manifests its presence through the miraculous signs that attend its proclamation by the Church. (*Quas primas*, 670)

Today's feast, then, has much real-world, daily-life significance for each of us. It is a hopeful message for today and every day, in spite of the undeniably fallen nature of this world that confronts us all too often.

How to Use Our Freedom

The Feast of Christ the King can be an opportunity for reflecting on our own freedom and for considering how we as Catholics are called to participate in public life. Getting some clarity about the possibilities in these two areas is essential for approaching and hopefully resolving many of the societal and cultural problems that plague us today. All Catholics should not only wish for but also actively pray and work for the renewal of our country, so that it becomes a place where it is easy for people to be virtuous, and where laws regarding marriage, the family, and education reflect the reality that Christ truly reigns.

Let's take a look at freedom first. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* tells us that

freedom is the power rooted in reason and will, to act or not, to do this or that, and so to perform deliberate action's on one's own responsibility. By free will one shapes one's own life. . . . The more one does what is good, the freer one becomes. There is no true freedom except in the service of what is good and just. The choice to disobey and do evil is an abuse of freedom and leads to "the slavery of sin." (*CCC*, 1731)

We know that we are free because we are made in the image and likeness of God, and the greatest gift he has given us is the capacity to deploy that freedom through the proper use of our intellect and will. Exercising our freedom affects not only others but also ourselves, and in a deeply formative, self-determining way. Indeed, each of us can say that, in important ways, we truly are or have become the choices we have made throughout our lives.

The Church today stands as virtually the sole defender of the reality of personal human freedom against the whole weight of modern ideologies which are gradually devolving into a return to a barbaric paganism. Within the Church we learn how to exercise our freedom well, by our imitation of Jesus Christ, who as the Lord of History is the Way, the Truth, and the Life. His Truth sets us free. In this life, the *Catechism* tells us, "progress in virtue, knowledge of the good, and ascesis enhance the mastery of the will over its acts." The ultimate judgment of the use of our freedom will take place in the afterlife, in both the particular and the final judgments when we will arrive to our final destination.

"My Kingdom Does Not Belong to This World"

We should ask, what is the role of the Church in terms of helping us to administer our freedom? In *Gaudium et spes*, the Pastoral Constitution of the Church in the Modern World, the Council Fathers of Vatican II tell us,

Christ did not bequeath to the Church a mission in the political, economic, or social order: the purpose he assigned to it was a religious one. But this religious mission can be the source of commitment, direction, and vigor to establish and consolidate the community of men, according to the law of God. (*Gaudium et spes*, 42)

This may be a surprising statement to some who view the Church in merely human terms. But we ought not to forget that its divine mission is to lead us to heaven. As Jesus tells Pilate in today's gospel reading, "My kingdom does not belong to this world." But on our way to heaven, and as a byproduct, so to speak, if we exercise our freedom correctly we will create an environment in which it becomes more and more possible for ourselves and all mankind to achieve a relative happiness in this world, while preparing for the next. The two happinesses, of this world and of the next, are very different and even incommensurable things, but they need not be understood as completely contradictory or incompatible.

Truly, there is a real Christian duty to improve things, to make things better in this world. But who is responsible for these temporal matters? We can be grateful that the answer is clear. "It is to the laity, though not properly exclusive to them, that secular activities and activity properly belong. . . . The laity are called to participate actively in the whole life of the Church; not only are they to animate world with the spirit of Christianity, but they are to be witnesses to Christ in all circumstances and at the very heart of the community of mankind" (*Gaudium et spes*, 43).

The pope and bishops are our pastors who are called to transmit to us divine revelation and the sacraments, which enable us to live according to that revelation. The rest of us, in turn, are called to be the leaders who evangelize government and all the other this-worldly realities of society and culture, precisely by the effective and holy use of our freedom. The teachings of the Second Vatican Council and their implementation by our recent popes all point out that the laity as members of the Church are called to use their freedom prudentially in the midst of the world, for both God's glory and the good of mankind.

St. Josemaria Escriva, a great and holy man, one of the most influential saints of the last century, stated the point this way: "Your task as Christian citizen is to help see Christ's life and freedom preside over all aspects of modern life: culture and the economy, work, and rest, family life, and social relations." In turn, may we enthusiastically reply with the words of the "sons of thunder" in sacred scripture, James and John: "We can!"

Practical Considerations

This important Feast of Christ the King has weighty practical implications. Christ reigns, now and eternally. As we hear in today's second reading: "I am the Alpha and the Omega . . . the one who is and who was and who is to come, the almighty." Even so, he counts on us as free and loving agents to prepare the way for his Second Coming!

How can we do that? Give some thought to this passage from St. Josemaria's book *The Furrow*:

The Lord has shown us this refinement of Love: he has let us conquer the world for him.

He is always so humble that he has wished to limit himself to making it possible. . . . To us He has granted the easiest and most agreeable part: taking action and gaining the victory.

The world . . . "That is our field!" you said, after directing your eyes and thoughts to heaven, with all the assurance of the farmer who walks through his own ripe corn. *Regnare Christum volumus!* – we want Him to reign over this earth of his!

"It is a time of hope, and I live off this treasure. It is not just a phrase, Father," you tell me, "it is a reality."

Well then . . . bring the whole world, all the human values which attract you so very strongly – friendship, the arts, science, philosophy, theology, sport, nature, culture, souls – bring all of this within that hope: the hope of Christ.

Note the all-encompassing nature of this message. No part of our lives, none of it, is cordoned off or irrelevant when it comes to Christ our King.

My last word. Want to change our culture? Then remember the corporal and spiritual works of mercy! When we feed hungry, give drink to the thirsty, clothe the naked, and bury the dead, we reflect in our lives and in our world the truth that Christ reigns. When we console the doubtful, instruct the ignorant, admonish sinners, comfort the afflicted, forgive offenses, bear wrongs patiently, and pray for the living and the dead, we do our part to make manifest today the Kingdom of God. When we take just a bit of time to reflect, we begin to see that opportunities to do these things present themselves all the time, every day, by God's own merciful grace.

Want to change the world for Christ and help re-evangelize our country? There is something – there are many things, indeed – for each of us to do, starting today, now. Get with the early Christians' winning program! Along with the sacraments and prayer, this is exactly how they radically changed the world. Go and imitate them!

About the Author

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FOR FURTHER READING

"Benedict XVI on Christ the King," available at:

<http://www.thesacredpage.com/2007/12/benedict-xvi-on-christ-king.html>

Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1730-1748, available at:

http://www.vatican.va/archive/ccc_css/archive/catechism/p3s1c1a3.htm

Joe Paprocki, "Practical Suggestions for Practicing the Corporal and Spiritual Works of Mercy," available at:

<http://www.oratoryschools.org/memos/January2015/Practical-Suggestions.pdf>

Pius XI, Quas primas, available at:

<http://w2.vatican.va/content/pius-xi/en/encyclicals>

IN SHORT . . .

- ***The kingdom of Christ embraces the whole of mankind, not only at the end of time but also now, in the hearts of all women and men.***
- ***We as Catholics are called to participate in public life; we should actively pray and work so that our country becomes a place where it is easy for people to be virtuous.***
- ***Within the Church we learn how to exercise our freedom well, by our imitation of Jesus Christ, whose Truth sets us free.***
- ***Christ reigns, now and eternally, but he also counts on us as free and loving agents to prepare the way for his Second Coming.***
- ***Opportunities to renew the world through the corporal and spiritual works of mercy present themselves all the time, every day, by God's own merciful grace.***