

Solemnity of Our Lord, Jesus Christ, the King of the Universe

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(The King of our Lives)

The Solemnity of Christ the King, which every Catholic throughout the entire world is celebrating today, is a new thing. The Church has existed for almost 2000 years, but this Solemnity is less than 100 years old. It was established by Pope Pius XI in 1925. He explained his reasons for doing so in an encyclical letter called "Quas primas". First he explained that throughout history liturgical feasts have been instituted in response to particular needs that arise in the life of the world and the Church (#22). He gives the example of the feasts in honor of the martyrs, of the celebration of Corpus Christi and the Sacred Heart. And then he explains which need this new celebration addresses. He was writing this encyclical in 1925, when the world was still trying to recover from World War I, which had devastated Europe and shattered modernity's hopes for unlimited progress based solely on human reason.

1925 was also only a few years after the Russian Bolshevik Revolution, which had given birth to the world's first explicitly atheist totalitarian regime: Soviet communism. Everywhere the pope looked, he saw human societies abandoning Christian values and trying to build paradise on earth through other means. But if humanity had been able to perfect itself by itself, without God's help, then Jesus Christ would never have come to earth. The fact is, Jesus did come. He brought his Gospel and his grace to a fallen race, and only by believing in that Gospel and accepting that grace can individuals and societies achieve true and lasting peace and prosperity. Pope Pius XI instituted today's Solemnity as a way to remind the world that to reject Christ, either in private life or in public life, is to reject our only hope, and to accept him is to accept salvation. As Pope Pius IX wrote: "...When once men recognize, both in private and in public life, that Christ is King, society will at last receive the great blessings of real liberty, well-ordered discipline, peace and harmony... That these blessings may be abundant and lasting in Christian society, it is necessary that the kingship of our Savior should be as widely as possible recognized and understood, and to that end nothing would serve better than the institution of a special feast in honor of the Kingship of Christ." (Quas primas, #19,21)

But Jesus is not just an all-powerful, all-knowing, and eternal King. He is also an infinitely generous King. Not only has he given us this earth, life, the laws of physics, chemistry, and biology, but he has also revealed to us the meaning of life, the path to true, lasting happiness on earth and eternal happiness in heaven. That's what today's Gospel passage is all about. In it, Jesus tells us exactly what is most important in life, exactly what really matters. It's not how much money we make. It's not how many awards we win. It's not how famous or popular we become. It's not how many groundbreaking discoveries we make. It's not how many people we have working under us. It's not even how much we enjoy ourselves. At the end of life, when we go before our Lord to present to him the results of our years on earth, he won't ask us about any of those secondary things - not one of them; they simply don't matter very much. What matters is whether or not we have learned how to love, how to give of ourselves for the benefit of others. Unless we are doing that, nothing else will have any meaning, and our hearts will be frustrated and sad. We were made to live in communion with God, and God, through Christ, has identified himself with every human being, so only by serving and loving them can we truly serve and love our King. At the end of life we all have to take a final exam, the only exam that really matters. Christ is the examiner, and in this passage he gives us ahead of time not only the questions on the exam, but also the answers. The uniqueness of Christ overflows into a uniqueness in Christianity - as, for example, when Jesus says to both groups of people in today's Gospel, "Amen, I say to you, whatever you did (or did not do) for one of the least brothers of mine, you did (or did not do) for me." This is another way of stressing the deep, inseparable connection between love for God and love for neighbor, something characteristic of the Christian worldview. In other words, as Christians, as followers of the Lord of history, we are not just called to be nice; we are called to be holy. Being nice means not ruffling other people's feathers; it is a comfort-centered virtue; it stays on the surface. Being holy means going out of our way to do what is morally right, and to serve others in need; it goes deep and always involves self-sacrifice, going the extra mile. Someone can be nice and still be completely self-centered - using niceness to gain popularity or defend one's comfort zone. But if we are striving for holiness, we become God-centered, and that is the path to inner freedom. The closer we come to God, the less we are controlled by mood swings, personality clashes, and pet peeves. Therefore, the closer we come to God, the freer we are to overcome our selfish tendencies and see and treat others like the brothers and sisters that they are - reaching out to them instead of judging them, serving them instead of using them; not just being nice, but being nice and being holy. Every day we have dozens of opportunities to serve Christ in our neighbors, but we won't

even notice them unless we have already developed a friendship with Christ. As we receive Holy common today, renew your confirmation commitment to Christ the King, ask him for the grace not only to admire him once a week, but to follow him faithfully by serving others all week long.