

[Readings: Daniel 7:13-14; Ps. 93; Rev. 1:5-8; John 18:33b-37]

On the last Sunday of the liturgical year, Catholics celebrate the Solemnity of Christ the King. A relative newcomer to the Church calendar -- established in the 20th century -- this feast is designed to give special recognition to the dominion Christ our Lord has over all aspects of our lives. But why and how did it come about? And why is it so important today?

When Cardinal Ambrogio Achille Ratti was elected pope and took the name Pope Pius XI, much of the world was in shambles. The year was 1922, and while the bloodletting of World War I (1914-1918) had ended, widespread peace and tranquility were not evident.

The "War to End All Wars" had been especially devastating to England and the countries of continental Europe. Additionally, the overthrow of the Romanov tsars by the Russian Revolution had created great upheaval in Russia and brought immense suffering. Governments were in economic chaos, unemployment was rampant and people in many places were starving to death.

The stability of the old social and political orders that had embraced royal houses and crowned heads of state were crumbling. The victorious warring powers sought severe penalties and unreasonable reparations from the vanquished Germans through the Treaty of Versailles.

Pessimism, a sense of helplessness compounded by hatred among the nations, was overwhelming. The time was ripe for the rise of tyrants, and rise they did. The festering philosophies of fascism, National Socialism (the Nazis) and communism now spawned the likes of Benito Mussolini, Adolf Hitler and Joseph Stalin. Pope Pius XI's predecessor, Pope Benedict XV, had warned about this prophetically in 1920 when he wrote, "There can be no stable peace or lasting treaties, though made after long and difficult negotiations and duly signed, unless there be a return of mutual charity to appease hate and banish enmity."

In their distress, people clung to anyone who offered them hope, offered some kind of direction out of the chaos and promised to put food on their tables.

They gravitated to the emerging dictators, and as they did they often sought to be self-sufficient to the exclusion of God from their everyday lives.

Many considered the basics of morality and the teachings of the Church to be out of date, no longer relevant in 20th-century society. Modern thinking allowed that, at most, Christ might be King in the private life of the individual, but certainly not in the public world. Does this sound familiar and ring true today?

Some political regimes advocated the banishment of Jesus altogether, not only from society, but from the family as well. As nations were reborn and governments restructured, their foundations, policies and laws were often being fashioned without regard to Christian principles.

In all these developments, the new Pope Pius XI saw that people were denying Christ in favor of a lifestyle dominated by secularism, material advantage and false hope created by the tyrants. He realized that he had to address the political and economic forces that were crowding out the kingship of Jesus. As a start, he dedicated his reign and motto as pope to “The Peace of Christ in the Kingdom of Christ” (*Pax Christi in Regno Christi*).

In 1925, the Church celebrated a jubilee year in honor of the 1,600th anniversary of the Council of Nicaea. The council fathers taking part in that ancient gathering in A.D. 325 had affirmed the full divinity of Jesus Christ as God the Son, one in being with God the Father. Their pronouncement became a creed that was later expanded into what we now call the Nicene Creed, which we still profess at Mass every Sunday. Throughout the anniversary year, Pope Pius constantly emphasized the kingship of Christ as declared in the Creed: “His kingdom will have no end.”

On Dec. 11, 1925, of the jubilee year, and in order to acknowledge perpetually the supremacy of Jesus Christ over all people, nations and earthly allegiances, the pope issued the encyclical *Quas Primas*, which added the feast of “Our Lord Jesus Christ the King” to the annual Church liturgical calendar. More than 340 religious leaders had asked for this feast day.

The pope instructed the faithful to use this annual celebration as a time to consecrate themselves, or renew their consecration to, the Sacred Heart of

Jesus, explicitly tying the celebration to devotion to the Sacred Heart and to the living Christ in the Eucharist. He also called for Catholics to make reparations for the widespread atheism being practiced in many countries.

In 1969, Pope Paul VI changed the name of the celebration to the feast of “Our Lord Jesus Christ, King of All” (*Domini Nostri Iesu Christi universorum Regis*) He also changed the date to the last Sunday in the liturgical year and its rank of celebration on the Church calendar, to that of a “solemnity.”

Today, peace still eludes us; social, political and economic orders are shaking; and the nations continue in many ways to reject the light of the Gospel. We can be grateful, then, for the chance to celebrate each year the Solemnity of Christ the King — for the world needs now, more than ever, our witness to His rule over all things. Pope Benedict XVI says this:

“But in what does this “power” of Jesus Christ the King consist? It is not the power of the kings or the great people of this world; it is the divine power to give eternal life, to liberate from evil, to defeat the dominion of death. It is the power of Love that can draw well from evil that can melt a hardened heart, bring peace amid the harshest conflict and kindle hope in the thickest darkness.”

This Kingdom of Grace is never imposed and always respects our freedom. Christ came “to bear witness to the truth” (Jn 18: 37), as He declares to Pilate: whoever accepts His witness serves beneath His “banner.” Every conscience, therefore, must make a choice. Who do I want to follow? God or the Evil One? The truth or falsehood?”

My friends, if we believe in the words of Jesus -- and that’s the biggest *if* we’ll ever be confronted with -- then all power over our lives belongs to Him and His reign, which has no end. This is a long term by any standard and “absolute power” in the infinite sense. No term limits and no territorial boundaries mean nothing on earth can challenge the authority of Jesus.

And if we find ourselves bowing our heads to another King or tipping our hats to a different Lord, we might ask ourselves why. Certainly we sympathize with Pilate for clutching the tatters of worldly power and not letting go when faced with something exponentially greater. The King of Elsewhere is a curious Lord to

follow, and putting our faith in him in no way implies that the powers of this world won't have at us -- as a glance at the cross soberly reminds us. Yet His testimony is truth, and His is the only authority that lasts.

In *History of the World: Part One*, Mel Brooks, playing Louis XVI, had a running gag: "It's good to be the king." It implied that the king was free to do whatever he wanted, wherever he wanted, and however he wanted to do it. Funny? Maybe. Historical? Not at all. What he really was describing was a despot or a dictator, not a good king. In reality, a good king was more like who Arthur grew to become in the movie *Excaliber*, a person who reflected the strength and beauty of the people during good times and the limitations and weaknesses when things weren't going well. Without the consent and hearts of the people, a king dominates with force and fear only.

Today we proudly proclaim Christ as our King. That means we freely take up the task of being loving, kind, and compassionate so as to reflect those qualities of Jesus. Jesus does not force Himself upon us. We listen to him. We know that His message is true, and so we respond. And in so doing we help Him create a Kingdom that will not be destroyed, a Kingdom of hope, and a Kingdom of justice for all. And the more that we live out our faith, the greater the grandeur of Christ our King will be revealed to the world. It is an awesome responsibility and partnership that we share. AMEN!