

Our Lord Jesus Christ, King of the Universe “Christ the King”

The name of this feast, as we commonly know it, brings together two realities that exist in an uncomfortable tension in the United States of America today, namely faith and politics. And this Solemnity, which ends the Liturgical Year, offers us the opportunity to reflect on the relationship of the eternal and the temporal, of faith and politics, of the Church and the State. The Solemnity of Christ the King allows us to reflect on the question of religious freedom.

Let's begin with some questions: What does it mean for us as Americans to celebrate the feast of Christ the King? How can this feast inform our life as citizens? What does this feast have to say about the relationship of faith and life, of being Catholic and being American? At first glance, this feast seems out of step with some contemporary American sensibilities, but upon reflection, it offers the opportunity for us to arrive at a deeper understanding of discipleship and our role as citizens in the United States.

In the years since the founding of our nation, the relationship of faith and culture has grown apart in some ways. Our older parishioners may well remember a time in our nation when faith, and expressions of faith, were less controversial. But things have changed. As a nation, we often seem to be defining ourselves with little regard for truth. We live in an age of relativism, where, ironically, the only truth that is imposed on us is that, when it comes to right and wrong, there is no absolute truth. Our own Supreme Court has stated that at the heart of liberty is the right for each of us to define the meaning of our lives.

Although it is not in the Constitution itself, we sometimes hear about the need for a wall of separation between Church and State. But if we are attentive to the Kingship of Christ in our lives, we know that there can be no “wall of separation” between our lives as believers and our lives as citizens. Our schools, public institutions, and public debate have been places where this kind of wall of separation has been built higher and higher. Coaches are reprimanded for bowing their heads at a prayer led by players. The two words “under God” in the voluntary recitation of the pledge of allegiance have come under repeated attack in court. Applicants to medical schools hide their pro-life views for fear they won't be accepted. The list goes on and on. In these ways, the wall of separation has been expanded even into our conversations and our speech.

Just as it is considered inappropriate to bring our conscience and convictions about the common good into the public square, the government has given itself ever more permission to intrude into the Church's territory. For example, under the so-called “HHS Mandate” – where the Department of Health & Human Services has required even objecting employers to provide insurance coverage for sterilization and contraceptives, including drugs that can cause an early abortion – we are now witnessing a new level of intrusion into the religious lives of its citizens. And it's not just coercion against conscience, but also government getting into the business of defining and dividing the religious community, contrary to its self-understanding. The only “religious employer”

exempted from the mandate is essentially a house of worship, which excludes all the religious ministries serving those most in need. The government has attacked religious freedom by defining it away, reducing the freedom of religion to the freedom of worship.

In short, whereas freedom of religion was initially granted to protect the Church from the interference of the State, the so-called "wall of separation" has become a way to protect the State from the Church: to prevent the Christian conscience from coming to bear on public policy. This wall is increasingly one of enclosure, not protection, as we are gradually relegated to celebrating our faith only in the privacy of our home and in the walls of our Churches. But, if we dare to venture beyond the wall, if we dare to bring truth into the public square, if we dare to bring our values and convictions to the public debate, we are accused of "imposing" our views by the same people who are imposing a wall of isolation around the Church.

Any student of history knows just how ironic and how far from the founding of our nation this is. It has been said that America did not create religious liberty but that religious liberty made America. Although it has indeed been challenged and attacked in various ways over the history of our country, religious freedom is in the very DNA of our founding. It is what defines us. It is why we exist as a nation. In this context, today's feast is a healthy corrective to so many false ideas.

Being a disciple of Christ demands that we go beyond this wall of separation. We must bring our faith out of the sanctuary and into the public square. We cannot confine our faith to private spaces, within in the four walls of our churches or our homes. As our Holy Father, Pope Francis said, "Religious freedom is not simply freedom of thought or private worship. It is the freedom to live according to ethical principles, both privately and publicly, consequent to the truth one has found." Our faith shapes every dimension of our lives. In the spirit of today's Gospel, we are reminded that we are called to express our faith in works of active charity. "For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, a stranger and you welcomed me, naked and you clothed me, ill and you cared for me, in prison and you visited me." (Matthew 25:35-36) We are called to allow our faith to shape every dimension of our lives, from the most private and personal to the public dimensions of our lives, including our citizenship. When the Lord teaches us that whatever we do to the least, we do to him, he teaches us the basic truth that we cannot separate our life and our faith, our politics and our creed, our charitable works and our worship.

Because we as Americans do not have an earthly king, it is especially easy for us to accept the truth about Christ the King. He is a King like no other. His Kingdom is not of this world. Yet, His Kingdom has great implications for this world. Because our Lord has no desire to conquer lands, he is a King who can easily coexist with our form of government. In fact, his kingship is essential to the thriving of our republic. For Christ the King desires to conquer only our hearts, to be the King of our Hearts. When he is the King of our hearts, we see as he sees, we love as he loves. When he is the King of our

Hearts, we recognize the dignity of all human persons, we are committed to justice, we have a great love for the poor, and we recognize our call to use the gifts that we have been given for the common good.

There is much debate in our nation about religious freedom. But the government did not give us religious freedom, and the government cannot take it away. Our freedom is a gift from God. Indeed, this gift lies at the heart of what it means for us to be human. By allowing Christ to be our King, our freedom grows. As Saint Paul says in the Second Reading, "in Christ shall all be brought to life." (1 Corinthians 15:22) Christ frees us from the slavery of materialism, from the slavery of living for the approval of others, from the slavery of the desires of the flesh, and, ultimately, from the slavery to sin. As the prophet Ezekiel says in the First Reading, the Lord God rescues us and, as the Good Shepherd, gives us rest. Through Christ, we become free because only through Christ can we become fully who we were created to be. Let us never forget this basic truth: no matter how many limits and restrictions are placed on us as believers, on the Church, or on Church institutions, no government can take away our freedom in Christ.

The feast of Christ the King is a call to holiness. As we celebrate Christ the King, we also are reminded of our call that Christ be the King of every dimension of our lives. Giving ourselves to Him entirely, holding back nothing, is the very essence of what it means to be holy. But this does not mean detachment from the world, for the greatest thing we can do for our society and our nation is to be a saint. Our King has been raised from the dead and has conquered death, so we have nothing to fear. The Lord is our shepherd, there is nothing we shall want. (Psalm 23:1)