

"Christ the King"
Homily of November 23, 2003
by Bishop Allen Vigneron

I am very grateful for the invitation to be with you to celebrate your patronal feast today. I had the opportunity of celebrating the previous Mass and I am glad to be able to stay on and join with you in offering the Holy Eucharist.

This feast day ends the Church year. We have been through the cycle now, one more time, of God's grace poured out from Advent, Christmas, Lent, Eastertime, Pentecost, to this day. Christ the King marks the consummation of the year of grace. It's the patronal feast of your parish and it is very much a gift of the twentieth century, this feast of Christ the King. It was established by Pius XI in the mid nineteen-twenties as a way to call the Christian people to confront the evils of totalitarianism, whether that was from the Nazi's in Central Europe or the Soviets, a period not long ago really, where memories are still very fresh.

And so, it's a contemporary grace, we might say, this feast day. And yet, I sense that, as people who live in the United States, there is kind of an obstacle that prevents us from fully entering into the celebration of this day. It lies perhaps in ascribing to Jesus the very name of King, this title. After all, from early on, in our history lessons, weren't we taught that it was King George the third who was the "bad guy?" Get rid of him! We threw tea into the Boston Harbor, and all of the other things that are part of our cultural heritage. And rightly, we are proud to live in a democratic republic. And, yet, if we let that attitude get in the way, there are graces, gifts, light from God that we will not receive. And so I hope that, by my preaching, I can be of some assistance to you in this matter today.

Perhaps some of the difficulty lies in kind of a "Sleeping Beauty" fairytale idea about kingship, picturing ermine robes and crowns and all sorts of carriages and pomp. It's not really what this is about today. Let's perhaps begin with a little saying that I don't think is quite so popular as it was a couple of years ago, you know, "fill-in-the-space rules." Actually, at the last Mass, one of the girls had a t-shirt that said, "Girls rule." You know that. "Boys rule." That is what the other side is going to say. For some people, "Golf rules." For a few, it is the indoor sport of shopping. That rules. In a more serious way, we understand that, in our nation, it is the will of the people that rules, that is sovereign. That's the sense of the title "King" ascribed to Jesus Christ. He rules. He is sovereign in this, that He orders our lives, that what He thinks, what He does, what He knows, this is the shape of the world. And we, who have joined His kingdom, we have accepted this rule and embraced it, so that His ideals, His aspirations, His commandments shape my reality, what I think, what I do, what I feel, what I am.

The gospel today presents Jesus to us ruling precisely because He is the witness to truth, not because He has great armies, great force, great might. In fact, the gospel of St. John presents Him as King exactly in His humiliation, standing bound and scourged before Pilate. He is King because He witnesses to this truth, that God is love and that it is by the force of love that God rules the world, that God has loved us from all eternity. God has created us precisely so that He could embrace us and make us His own. This truth, that we have been so foolish as to have thrown that love back in God's face and walked away, this truth that God's love is so deep that He did not take that as our last word, but ran after us, sent His Son to fetch us and bring us back and that, at the end, to dissolve the barriers between ourselves and Him, the Son died on the cross to destroy the power of sin and bring us into eternal life. This is the truth that rules.

This is the truth that rules our lives, that if the grain of wheat remained just that, it would have been without any life, but because the grain of wheat fell to the ground and died, there is now life. And that truth of the Passover Mystery is what shapes our lives. We sort of got our naturalization papers into the Kingdom of God on the day that we were baptized, when we were plunged into this truth of the death of Jesus to rise with Jesus. And the truth of our lives is sacrifice, gift, that insofar as we cling to ourselves and our own ways and close ourselves off and try to protect ourselves, we will fail. The truth of those who belong to the Kingdom of Christ is that insofar as we give ourselves away, insofar as the life of Jesus, His sacrifice, is in us we will survive. We will conquer.

This is the first occasion that I will have had to celebrate the feast of Christ the King in California. And the Holy Spirit has particularly brought to my mind in this celebration the bond that exists between our diocese and the faithful, the Church, in Guadalajara. Perhaps many of you are aware that lots and lots of the Latino Catholics in this diocese come from the area around Guadalajara. And I understand that God has brought this to mind because, in that region, there were many faithful Christians who, in the twenties, in that time of totalitarian regimes, died with these words on their lips, "Long live Christ the King.... Viva Christo Rey!" Some of them, for example like Jose Mario Robles, a family man, who said to Christ, "I want to love your heart to the point of martyrdom," and who was granted that gift. A young priest, Attilano Cruz Alberado, twenty-seven years old, killed eleven months after his ordination, shot, because it was a capital crime to be a priest. David Rodan Lara, twenty-four years old, engaged to be married at the time of his arrest. He and his cousin, both young men, were shot together, and the young priest who is, for me, a great source of inspiration, St. Torribio Romo Gonzales, from the small puebla of Santa Anna de Guadalupe. His two prayers in life were granted, never to miss daily Communion and to have the Lord accept his blood in sacrifice. And there are many more of these martyrs of Christ the King.

As I say, I believe my celebration of this feast day here in California, for the first time today, is rightly tied to remembering these young people because they remind us in a very realistic way, of what it means to accept Christ as King. It means that our religion is about more than finding comfort and a sweet word of consolation, though there is comfort and consolation in our Christian faith. It is more than simply embracing a noble value system, though the gospel does

tell us of noble values, of right and wrong and a good way to live. But to be a Christian, these lives lived not far away and not long ago, these lives remind me and I am sure they remind you, that to accept Christ as our King is to give Him a total personal allegiance. It is to say that you, Jesus Christ, are the truth for Whom I would lay down my life, and, if I ever were to have denied you, I would have lied. I would have made my life into a lie. That is what it meant when they were shot with those words on their lips, "Long live Christ the King." Dramatic, yes, but I don't think overly dramatic.

Yes, we take things for granted. You come here Sunday after Sunday. You are used to this, to saying, "Christ has died. Christ has risen. Christ will come again....," to professing Christ. You are accustomed to receiving Holy Communion. But really, to accept the Body of Christ is always to acknowledge where that Body has been. It hung on the cross to proclaim this truth and establish this kingdom of love. When you come out of your pew and stand here to receive communion, to drink from the chalice, these are not empty gestures. This banquet that you and I share in, this is the food of martyrs. This is the food of Christian heroes. And in celebrating the Eucharist, we accept this benchmark in our lives, this measure, that says, "I belong to Christ, everything, my whole being, every fibre of my flesh is in service to Him. And in that service I am made free, free to love, free to pour myself out for him and my neighbor as He has poured Himself out for us.

Listen.... Watch.... Say the words of the prayers in the Mass today, always attentive, that with every gesture, every hymn we sing, every prayer we offer, we, like these remarkable martyrs from the nineteen twenties, say "Long live Christ the King."