

Feast of Christ the King 2015

Stat crux dum volvitur orbis.



Stat crux dum volvitur orbis – “The cross standeth still while the world spins around.” These words, which form the motto of the Carthusian monks, are inscribed on the obelisk at the centre of St. Peter’s Square in Rome. This classical monument to the pagan deities of Egypt was brought to Rome in ancient times and it was the last thing St. Peter, the first pope, saw when he was martyred. After the triumph of Christianity the obelisk was surmounted by a cross. In the Passiontide liturgy we sing, *Regnavit a ligno Deus*, “God has reigned from the wood of the cross.” For the cross is the throne of the King whose feast we celebrate today.

“The cross standeth still while the world spins around.” This same idea was expressed in different words by the poet who said, “Against the Word the unstilled world still whirled/About the centre of the silent Word” (T.S. Eliot, *Ash Wednesday*, V). It always makes me laugh when strangers – in a train or at the post office, for example – say to me, “Father, don’t you think the Church needs to get with the times?” It makes me laugh because the answer is always the same: “People have been saying that for two thousand years; the times get and go, but the Church is still here.” *Stat crux dum volvitur orbis.*

When Pope Pius XI established this great feast back in 1925 the twin demons of Fascism and Communism were greedily grabbing at the ruins of a world left over from the Great War. But these godless ideologies, mortal enemies though they were, were more like a hydra: a two-headed monster. In this case, the monster with two heads was an error called *laicism*: the idea that human society can be organised without reference to God. A silly idea of course, as if a restaurant could be organised without reference to food or a hospital without medicine. But with the mythical hydra, when one head is cut off, another grows. And in fact the error of laicism began long before the twentieth century; it began when Lucifer hurled his *Non serviam*, “I will not serve” (Jeremiah 2:20), and there was war in heaven. The crowds who called for the execution of Our Lord – the only democratic decision narrated in the Scriptures – were laicists when they proclaimed, “We will not have this man to reign over us” (Luke 19:14), for “we have no king but Caesar” (John 19:15). The blunt force of Fascism and Communism may come and go, but today we live under what Benedict XVI called the “dictatorship of relativism.”

On this feast of Christ the King, we raise our voices to say, *Yes! We WILL have this man to reign over us; this man who is God, clothed in our humanity; this man who*

triumphs from the cross; this God who is the only one who can bring peace to our world: YES, he must reign! This was the desire of the first Christians, whose mouthpiece was St. Paul: “for he must reign, until he hath put all his enemies under his feet” (I Corinthians 15:25). The martyrs died with this confident hope: time moved on and Herod and Pilate and Nero were no more, and behold the Church died not. They that had no king but Caesar were scattered to the four corners of the world and their city was no more; the day came when even Caesar was no more, and slowly even the kings of the earth came to acknowledge their King. Our ancestors of the Middle Ages could be excused for thinking that perhaps the Scripture prophecy of the heavenly kingdom had already been fulfilled: “The kingdom of this world is become our Lord’s and his Christ’s” (Apocalypse 11:15).

But our ancestors were wiser men than we, and they knew that heaven does not exist on earth: not yet. Before the final triumph of Christ’s Kingdom at the end of time, the devil is still in some sense “the prince of this world” (John 14:30), even though his power is limited. I am sure you know these words of St. Augustine: “two cities have been formed by two loves: the earthly by the love of self, even to the contempt of God; the heavenly by the love of God, even to the contempt of self” (*City of God*, XIV, 28). The City of God and the City of Man remain intertwined in this world, even in our own souls. *Utopia* literally means “no where” and the madmen who build utopias leave behind them not heaven on earth but pain and suffering. That is why Rousseau – a man so arrogant that he wrote a book on the education of young people after leaving his own illegitimate children to die in dank orphanages – spoke for the values of the so-called Enlightenment when he said that men “must be forced to be free” (*The Social Contract*, I, 7). You can ask the victims of the French Revolution or the Cristeros in Mexico, all killed by laicist tyrants, what it means to be forced to be free.

This false freedom has become the idol of the modern world, and yet Christ the King tells us, “you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free” (John 8:32). Will we respond like Pilate in today’s Gospel by asking, “What is truth?” (John 18:38). We do not know what language Our Lord used to speak to the Roman governor, but in the Latin text of this Gospel, the Holy Spirit has smiled when this phrase emerged from Pilate’s lips: “What is truth,” *quid est veritas*. Rearranging these words into an anagram we have: *est vir qui adest*, “it is the man who is here.” Truth is Christ: the eternal Word of God made man. Our God is not a capricious tyrant who terrorises us by changing his mind, like the Islamic deity of Pure Will; our God is Wisdom itself, truth and goodness made flesh. That is why in the Book of Proverbs, God speaks as personified Wisdom and says, “By me kings reign, and lawgivers decree just things; by me princes rule, and the mighty decree justice” (8:15-16).

The idea of a value-neutral society is a myth – a myth whose mendacity becomes more apparent every day, as we see hospitals run by nuns forced to pay for contraceptives and Christian registrars sent to prison for upholding true marriage. As Christians we render to God what is God’s and to Caesar what is Caesar’s, aware of the fact that, ultimately, very little belongs to Caesar. We cannot accept the laicist error that Christians have rights only within the four walls of their churches. We will not be forced to free if such freedom means betraying Christ to serve the prince of this world. It was not for a non-descript freedom of conscience that the martyrs died: they died for Christ the King.

The words of Pius XI ninety years ago today have a greater urgency than ever: “While nations insult the beloved name of our Redeemer by suppressing all mention of it in their conferences and parliaments, we must all the more loudly proclaim his kingly dignity and power, all the more universally affirm his rights” (*Quas Primas*, 25). And so, let each one of us begin today to reconquer territory for our King by starting in our own souls. Every Christian in the state of grace bears within himself the ember of a new Christendom. Our hearts at least must be the throne from which our king reigns. Mia Rose, on this day of your first holy communion, I speak now directly to you: always remember that Jesus is your King. Once you have received him, never let him go. To you all, dear friends, I say the same thing.

Our hearts may be heavy as we survey the scattered ruins of Christendom: we know that Christ once reigned here in our laws, in our arts, in all our social customs. We look at our King reigning from the Cross and then we look at the new Pilates and the children of Rousseau in Church and state and we weep to see that they have uncrowned him. But we know that they shall not have the last word: “The cross standeth still while the world spins around.”

