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WHAT IS 'THE KINGDOM OF GOD'?

A theologian explains the key image of the Gospel and
the message at the center of Jesus' teaching and ministry.

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There was a time when the word *kingdom*—like *fellowship* and *ministry*—was viewed by many Catholics as belonging to the Protestants and, hence, as being less than center stage in the Catholic tradition. Many Catholics even today, therefore, might be surprised to learn that the kingdom of God is at the heart of Jesus' preaching.

If they were asked to summarize the point and purpose of Jesus' life, they probably would say he came "down" from heaven to pay the price of our sins and then went back "up" to heaven after the Resurrection. They might add that we have the Church to keep alive the teachings and instructions of Jesus and to make available the treasury of grace he won on Calvary.

But Jesus did not come among us primarily to establish the Church. His main mission was to promote and manifest the kingdom of God. He entered our midst to proclaim that the kingdom of God is close at hand (Mk 1:15), to call us to conversion and repentance (Lk 10:13–5, 13:1–5, 19:41–44; Mt 11:20–24), and to urge us to be watchful and ready for the kingdom (Lk 12:35–40; Mt 25:1–13).

What is this kingdom of God that so preoccupied Jesus? Certainly not a kingdom in the worldly sense. "My kingdom does not belong to this world" (Jn 18:36), Jesus insisted.

The Kingdom of God exists wherever God's will is at work. And God's will is at work wherever people are faithful to the command that we love one another as God first loved us.

THE KINGDOM IS 'GOD'S REDEMPTIVE PRESENCE'

We can define the kingdom of God as the redemptive presence of God. This redemptive (or saving) presence of God can be found in everyday personal experiences. Whenever people love one another, forgive one another, bear one another's burdens, work to build up a just and peaceful community—wherever people are of humble heart, open to their Creator, and serving their neighbor—God's redemptive and liberating presence is being manifested. God's kingdom and loving rule are in operation there.

Jesus indicated this when he told the crowds, "Blessed are the poor in spirit; theirs is the Kingdom of heaven.



... Blessed are those who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness; theirs is the kingdom of heaven" (Mt 5:3, 10). God's redemptive presence is surely at work in them.

Because there is no limit to the presence of God, the kingdom of God has no boundaries. The kingdom may exist in the individual human heart, in groups, in institutions, in nature, and in the cosmos as a whole. The kingdom of God is as broad and as overarching as the presence of God that renews and transforms and recreates everything touched by it.

And just as there is no limit to the spatial boundaries of the kingdom, so there are no limits to its temporal

boundaries. The kingdom is not just for the future. It is not to be identified only with heaven, in other words. When we pray, "Thy kingdom come," we are hoping also for the inbreaking of God's power—right now—in our daily lives. Our God is a living God. God's power is a present power.

THE CHURCH PROCLAIMS THE KINGDOM

This threefold dimension (past, present, future) of the kingdom of God shapes the mission of the Church which, according to the Second Vatican Council, "has a single intention:

DIG DEEPER

In what ways can you help bring about the kingdom of God?

What do we learn about the kingdom from Jesus' life and ministry?

How do you view the Church's role in the kingdom?

that God's Kingdom may come . . ." (*Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World* 45).

The past. The mission of the Church is, first, to proclaim that the kingdom of God has already come, and most definitively in Jesus Christ. The Church proclaims this conviction through its various preachings of the word and through the sacraments that commemorate and celebrate God's intervening in our history through Jesus.

The present. Second, the Church is called to be a living and vibrant model—or sign—of the reality of the kingdom of God so that people today, both inside and outside the community of faith, might look at this model and know that God still lives and that the presence of God is always a presence for healing, for reconciliation, for justice, for peace, for freedom, and so forth.

The future. Third, the Church is to focus the eyes, the mind, and the heart of the world on what yet lies ahead, upon that promised kingdom where God "will wipe every tear from their eyes, and there shall be no more death or mourning, wailing or pain, [for] the old order has passed away" (Rv 21:4).

And, more than that, the Church is meant to be a servant to the world in doing all it can to narrow the gap between the kingdom as now only partly begun and the full flowering of that kingdom.

In summary then, the Church is meant to be:

1. a proclaimer of the kingdom of God already begun;
2. a sign revealing God's kingdom or redemptive presence now; and
3. a servant of the continuous unfolding of the kingdom.

The Church fills this last role by acting on behalf of the poor and the oppressed, and the persecuted as Jesus did and as he instructed us to do as his disciples (Mt 5:1–12).

Whether we ourselves enter the kingdom will be determined by our response to the neighbor in need. Those who feed the hungry, clothe the naked, welcome the stranger, and comfort the sick are those who inherit the kingdom (Mt 25:31–46), thus manifesting God's redemptive presence on this earth.

CHURCH IS NOT EQUAL TO THE KINGDOM

The kingdom is larger than the Church. After all, "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only one who does the will of my Father in heaven" (Mt 7:21). Or, in the words of St. Augustine as adapted by Karl Rahner, SJ: "Many whom God has, the Church does not have. And many whom the Church has, God does not have."

KINGDOM'S COMING DEPENDS ON AN ATTITUDE OF HEART

This kingdom and this salvation, which are the key words of Jesus Christ's evangelization, are available to every human being as grace and mercy. And yet at the same time each individual must gain them by force—they belong to the violent, says the Lord (Mt 11:12; Lk 16:16), through toil and suffering, through a life lived according to the Gospel, through abnegation and the Cross, through the spirit of the beatitudes. But above all each individual gains them through a total interior renewal that the Gospel calls *metanoia*; it is a radical conversion, a profound change of mind and heart.

— Saint Paul VI, *On Evangelization in the Modern World* (10)

ALL ARE CALLED TO THE KINGDOM

Ecumenism requires even greater breadth of vision than seeing the Church as including all Christians. Ecumenism demands also that we see the kingdom of God as including, at least in principle, all human beings. "The Catholic Church rejects nothing which is true and holy in these religions" for they "often reflect a ray of that Truth which enlightens all men and women" (*Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to Non-Christian Religions* 2).

The parable of the Good Samaritan illustrates our point. God's kingdom, or redemptive presence, was not revealed in the priest or Levite (representatives of the institutional religion) who ignored the wounded traveler, but in the Samaritan, the outsider, who was a good neighbor to the person in need. The Good Samaritan was part of the kingdom even though he was not part of what was considered the one true religion. We know everyone is called to the kingdom even if we can't say for certain who has been called to the Church.

If the Church can bring many to confess that Jesus is their Lord and their God, so much the better. But another real measure of the Church's missionary effectiveness is its capacity to bring the world closer to the kingdom. The Church is doing God's work if it brings men and women to the point where they are being good neighbors—where they are doing God's will and manifesting his saving presence—even if they never say, "Lord, Lord" (see also Mt 25:31–46).

If other religions serve this same purpose and seem to be authentic instruments of the kingdom, we Christians can only rejoice in the triumph of God's grace and power wherever God is at work.

Everything, including the Church, is subject to the kingdom. In other words, the Church is answerable to the kingdom and gets its credibility by manifesting the kingdom, and not vice versa.

If the Church is not itself the kingdom, then at least three things follow: (1) the Church as a community and as an institution is not above criticism and reform; (2) the primary mission of the Church is not precisely to bring people into the Church but to bring them into the kingdom; and (3) God also works outside the Church and even in other religions.

You might ask, "Whatever happened to the 'one true Church' formula?" First, we understand now that *Church* applies to the whole body of Christ, to all Christians, and not just to Catholics alone. As Vatican II's *Decree on Ecumenism* declares: "... all those justified by faith through baptism are incorporated into Christ. They therefore have a right to be honored by the title of Christian and are properly regarded as brothers and sisters in the Lord by the sons and daughters of the Catholic Church" (3).

THE KINGDOM IS GOD

The kingdom of God is brought about by God and is God's gift. But it does not come about without human collaboration. It is proclaimed by the Church in word and in sacrament. It is signified by the Church in its very life. And it is enabled to break into the world more fully through the various efforts of the Church on behalf of justice, peace, and human reconciliation.



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Whether we ourselves enter the kingdom will be determined by our response to the neighbor in need.

When all is said and done, the kingdom of God is God: God in so far as God is present to us and to our world as a power that heals, that renews, that recreates, and that gives life. To recognize that abiding presence of the kingdom of God in our midst and to work always to remove obstacles to its inbreaking are our fundamental missionary responsibilities. God's gift is our task.

Fr. Richard P. McBrien served as a priest in the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Hartford, CT from his ordination in 1962 until his death in 2015. He was a well-known scholar and the Crowley-O'Brien Professor of Theology at the University of Notre Dame. He authored 25 books, a number of articles, and columns and also contributed as a general editor to the *Encyclopedia of Catholicism* and a contributing commentator on several national television networks. His work explored the relationship between religion and politics and the theological, doctrinal, and spiritual aspects of the Catholic Church.