CHRIST THE KING SUNDAY, 2026

In contemporary Roman Catholic practice, the last Sunday before Advent, the final Sunday of the year of worship, is designated Christ the King Sunday. The first reading, a lesson from chapter 34 of Ezekiel, indicates that the Kingship of Jesus Christ is like the work of a good shepherd, who makes sure that his sheep are well nourished, gathered together, and protected. Protected from what? The second reading, from chapter 1 of St. Paul's First Epistle to the Corinthians, tells us that our Shepherd King protects from the final enemy, death. Death will grab us, as it grabbed Him, hanging on the Cross; but, by His power, death will not be able to pin us down, anymore than it was able to pin Him down. He rose from death to share victory over death with all who belong to Him. Who belongs to Him? The Gospel from chapter 25 of Matthew tells us that those belong to the Lord Jesus Christ who have Faith in Him and who perform the Good Works that flow from Faith, feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, welcoming the stranger, clothing the naked, caring for the sick, and visiting the imprisoned.

We have a King, the Man Christ Jesus, the Man Who is also the Eternal Word of God. Jesus Christ is the Divine Word Who assumed Flesh and dwelt among us, becoming forever True Man. He won our allegiance by His combat against sin and death, leading Him to die on the Cross to conquer our sins, and to rise from the tomb to conquer our death. Having won our allegiance by His mystical war and victory, He has the right to give us law, the law of loving action described in today's Gospel. "Whatever you do for one of these least brethren of mine, you do for Me."

For most of my life, I have heard teachers, politicians, and judges solemnly intone words to the effect that "in America, we have a government of laws, not of men." From the first time I heard these words, they struck as stark raving nonsense. Laws don't make men, men make laws. Laws don't enforce themselves, men do. Laws don't interpret themselves, men do. Laws don't confer legitimacy on human beings. Good human beings confer legitimacy on laws. The relationship between good laws and good men is nothing like the famously puzzling relationship between the chicken and the egg. In this case, we know what came first: men make laws, and good men make laws legitimate things. Thus, what we proclaim in the Church is firstly Jesus Christ and His victory over sin and death. Then, on the basis of Who He is, we proclaim the law of Charity that He gave us. First we proclaim the King, then we proclaim His law. First we adore the King, and then we obey His law.

Whether or not Judaism and Islam can properly be called "religions of the Book" is a question we hardly need to get into here and now; but it must be said - and maybe even shouted - that Christianity is not a religion of the Book. It is a religion of the Man, the Man Christ Jesus. He never wrote a book, though we firmly believe that His Holy Spirit inspired the Sacred Scriptures through which we come to know Him. Still, it is His deeds and not the Book that won our salvation and deserve our allegiance. It is the Man Christ Jesus who makes the Book holy, authoritative and binding, not the other way around. Christianity is a religion of the Man, our Lord Jesus Christ, Whom we worship, love, and obey.

In the generally disappointing "Hobbit" movies, one Dwarf was given a fine line about one of those movies' many (too many) characters, the disinherited king Thorin Oakenshield. Having seen Thorin's heroism, he remarks "there is one I could call king." Exactly! I can obey this king's laws because of the kind of person the king is. Now, in the sacred Scriptures and in

the holy Church we proclaim Christ Crucified, in image, in word, and especially in Sacrament. Look at the image of HIm Who died on the Cross to take away our sins, and look at the Sacrament of Him Who lives to become our food of eternal life, and say “here is one I can call king!” Today, on this last Sunday of the year of worship, the Roman Catholic Church solemnly calls Him our King, and pledges to obey His laws because of the kind of Man (God-Man) He is.

Christ is the head, and the members of His Church are His body. Being the kind of Man He is, He makes His followers who truly believe in HIm, receive His Spirit, and, helped by His Grace, try to imitate HIm, into saints. It is not, however, they who make Him great, He makes them great. The Leader goes first, inspiring and enabling His people to follow Him, through mortal life and death, into Eternal Life.

Merely human affairs can never be truly like that, but they sometimes do echo it. George Washington hardly accomplished American independence single handedly, but he was the one indispensable man in the whole drama of Independence. He wasn’t a military genius, but because of the kind of man he was, people could believe that the War of Independence could actually be won. He didn’t contribute a word or idea to the Constitutional Convention, but he presided over it, and everyone knew he would be the first President under the new Constitution. Because of the kind of man he was, people could trust that the new Constitution wouldn’t just be pretty words, and that the new government could be trusted and obeyed (and, in real life, obedience requires trust). I notice that a new movie has been made in France about one member of my personal pantheon of great men, Charles de Gaulle. In the aftermath of disastrous national defeat and the complete collapse of national morale, he, without legal mandate or any kind of election, called out to France, “Follow me!” Making a very long story short, France followed him. The man, brave, infuriating, and inspiring, had a legitimacy conferred not by law but by character.

Of course, we need laws. As our King of Kings pointed out to the Pharisees, however, law is, of all idols, one of the most dehumanizing. The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath, said Jesus, to the Pharisee’s lethal annoyance. The starting point of all good human things is a good human being. The starting point of good law is good men; good men to make it, good men to interpret it, good men to enforce it. Law is made for people, not people for the law. All good kings know this; and the King of Kings knows this best of all.

On this Lord’s Day of Christ the King, let us ask Him to help us, men and women, old and young, to acquire, by His Grace, a truly good character. A good character is a foundation more solid for life than government or law, and the one thing most likely to make both of those commodities work. Let us ask Him to help us acquire something of the courage of the Good Shepherd, something of the invincible hope of the Savior, and something of the unfailing and tireless charity of the Son of Man.