



On the Feast of Christ the King: What's in a Date?

So, what's in a date? One Peter Five contributor Dr. Peter Kwasniewski asked that question recently when discussing the Church's celebration for the Feast of Christ the King. The feast itself was instituted by Pope Pius XI with his encyclical *Quas Primas* (11 December 1925). The Holy Father states clearly his purpose for instituting such a universal feast day:

“The Church, founded by Christ as a perfect society, has a natural and inalienable right to perfect freedom and immunity from the power of the state; and that in fulfilling the task committed to her by God of teaching, ruling, and guiding to eternal bliss those who belong to the kingdom of Christ, she cannot be subject to any external power.”

(...)

“Nations will be reminded by the annual celebration of this feast that not only private individuals but also rulers and princes are bound to give public honor and obedience to Christ. It will call to their minds the thought of the last judgment, wherein Christ, who has been cast out of public life, despised, neglected and ignored, will most severely avenge these insults; for his kingly dignity demands that the State should take account of the commandments of God and of Christian principles, both in making laws and in administering justice, and also in providing for the young a sound moral education.”

“The faithful, moreover, by meditating upon these truths, will gain much strength and courage, enabling them to form their lives after the true Christian ideal. If to Christ our Lord is given all power in heaven and on earth; if all men, purchased by his precious blood, are by a new right subjected to his dominion; if this power embraces all men, it must be clear that not one of our faculties is exempt from his empire. He must reign in our minds...He must reign in our wills...He must reign in our hearts...He must reign in our bodies and in our members...”

Understanding the full purpose of a feast day to honor the rule of Christ Our King, let's now turn to the reasoning and intent behind the date selected by Pope Pius XI. As Dr. Kwasniewski explains:

“One of the most egregious differences between the two calendars (in the Latin Rite) is the location of the Feast of the Kingship of Our Lord Jesus Christ. In the old calendar, it is always celebrated on the last Sunday of the month of October, right before All Saints. In the new calendar, however, it is the last Sunday of the liturgical year, leading up to the First Sunday of Advent...”

“Pius XI’s intention...is to emphasize the glory of Christ as terminus of His earthly mission, a glory and mission visible and perpetuated in history by the saints. Hence the feast falls shortly before the Feast of All Saints, to emphasize that what Christ inaugurated in His own person before ascending in glory, the saints then instantiate and carry further in human society, culture, and nations. It is a feast primarily about celebrating Christ’s ongoing kingship over all reality, including this present world, where the Church must fight for the recognition of His rights, the actual extension of His dominion to all domains, individual and social.”

Dr. Kwasniewski further notes:

*“Indeed, there’s also the obvious fact, unmentioned in Quas Primas but surely in everyone’s mind, that the last Sunday in October had, for centuries, been celebrated as Reformation Sunday. A Catholic counter-feast, reminding the world not only of the comprehensive Kingship of Jesus Christ—so often denied socially and culturally by various teachings of Protestantism—but also of the worldwide kingly authority of His Church, would certainly be a reasonable application of the principle *lex orandi, lex credendi*.”*

“In the liturgical reforms following the Second Vatican Council, its place was changed to the last Sunday of the Church year—that is, so that one week later would fall the first Sunday of Advent. This new position emphasizes rather the eschatological dimension of Christ’s kingship...”

“Though both placements are defensible, it would seem that Pius XI’s intention, consistent with the encyclical as a whole, was more to insist on the rights of Jesus Christ here and now, and the corresponding duties of men and nations on earth...”

*“From this vantage, which certainly does not sound like the language of *Dignitatis Humanae* or the postconciliar diplomacy of the Church, it is hard to resist thinking that the eschatological perspective betrays weak knees before the challenge of modern secularization, as well as hesitation about the perceived “triumphalism” of the earlier papal social teaching. In other words, the kingship of Christ is palatable and proclaimable so long as its realization comes at the end of time and does not impinge too much on the political and social order right now—or on the Church’s responsibility to convert the nations, invigorate their cultures, and transform their laws by the light of the Faith.”*

In the end, whether celebrated in late October according to the old calendar, or this Sunday according to the new, ultimately the Feast of Christ the King reminds us that it is Our Lord who rules over Heaven and Earth, and all persons and principalities are subject to his reign.

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