

Solemnity of Our Lord Jesus Christ the King – Cycle A
Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception – November 26, 2017
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¡Viva Cristo Rey! Long live Christ the King! Those were the last words spoken by Miguel Pro, a Jesuit priest killed by a government firing squad in Mexico in November, 1927 – ninety years ago this week. His crime: living his Catholic faith and encouraging others to do the same. You see, the Church’s practice of the faith – educating the young, caring for the sick – indeed, doing anything other than staying quietly in your church and celebrating Mass – was outlawed by the Mexican Constitution of 1917. But it wasn’t until a new president was installed in 1926 that those laws begin to be enforced. Priests were arrested and imprisoned, religious schools and hospitals were closed or confiscated by the state, churches were desecrated. A rebellion began in the rural areas of the country. Led by men who called themselves the Cristeros – the soldiers of Christ the King, and by women who called themselves the Feminine Brigades of St. Joan of Arc, these rebels resisted the attempts by the government to restrict their religious expression. The fight grew violent. Thousands of lives were lost on both sides and the Church now recognizes 25 of the martyred rebels as saints, and another 14 – including Blessed Miguel Pro – have been beatified. These years represented the worst persecution of the Catholic Church since the days of England’s Elizabeth the First. How could this happen, you may ask? How could the Church be persecuted in Mexico? In such a Catholic country? Right next door to the United States? Well, it actually happened with the support of the American federal government. The Coolidge administration sent guns, ammunition, and air support to the repressive Mexican regime. But it happened primarily because the wealthy Catholics who actually controlled Mexico preferred their wealth to their faith. Given an opportunity to resist the extreme anti-Catholic measures enacted by the government, most of the “so-called” Catholic ruling class sided with the government against those ultra-religious peasants. Yes, they paid lip service to the Catholic faith – but Christ was absolutely not their king.

As we celebrate this Solemnity of Christ the King, as we draw to a close our liturgical year, our year with the Gospel of Matthew, Christ’s message today could not be more straightforward, or more challenging. When the Son of Man comes in glory, surrounded by the angels, seated on his glorious throne, he will not ask for your royal lineage, or for a statement of your net worth, or for your lists of Twitter followers or Facebook friends. Instead, he will ask when you fed the hungry, or gave drink to the thirsty, when you welcomed the stranger or clothed the naked, when you cared for the sick or visited the imprisoned. When did you live your

faith? And when did you fail to do so? In other words, Christ will ask us – Was I your king, or did you worship someone else?

That's a challenging question for us. As Americans, we don't think of ourselves as having a king. Oh, we like to watch the pageantry over in Europe every now and again. Our Hollywood stars and politicians' daughters are said to have "royal" weddings. But we do not have a monarch, a royal family, or titled nobility – at least not officially. What we do have are plenty of things that get in the way of our practice of the faith. We have plenty of kings who do not wear a crown but who receive our allegiance nonetheless. You see, we don't mind being Catholic, being Christian, as long as it doesn't interfere with our income stream, with our social standing, with our recreation. Ask some of our children or young people – those who are too young to drive themselves here – ask some of these young people what kept them from Mass on Sunday and you'll be amazed at the responses you'll get: Oh, there was a soccer tournament, a football game, a famous band was appearing the night before and we were out late. And did you know that there are no Catholic churches in Nashville, St. Louis, New York, Louisiana? That's what we hear from our children. It seems that any where our young people travel, the universal church hasn't quite made it there yet. There was no Catholic Church that had a Sunday Mass where we visited. Clearly the public worship of God isn't a priority in the lives of their families. And that's just Mass attendance. Imagine what happens when the rubber hits the road – when forced to choose between less money and engaging in immoral, if not outright illegal, activities. Imagine what happens when standing up for what is just, what is right would mean ridicule or economic ruin. Imagine how easy it is to forget the hungry, the thirsty, the homeless, and the stranger, when we cross the street or drive around their neighborhoods to be sure that we don't even make eye contact. We may not have a political king, but we bow before the thrones of comfort, of security, of prosperity, of popularity. Would we make Christ our King? Well, only if he doesn't cause us any trouble.

But, you see, Christ is always causing trouble – always challenging us to see his presence in those we'd rather avoid, always challenging us to be moral leaders rather than immoral followers. That's what separates the sheep from the goats, the righteous from the condemned in our gospel today. It isn't that the second group of people did anything wrong – they weren't condemned because they killed anyone, lied about anyone, cheated anyone. They did nothing wrong – in fact, they did nothing at all. They never lifted a finger to help anyone else. We don't know who ruled in their lives – but we can be certain that Christ was not their king. If Christ returned tomorrow, would we be counted among the sheep or among the goats? Is Christ our king?