"Think Tank"

Commentaries

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2021

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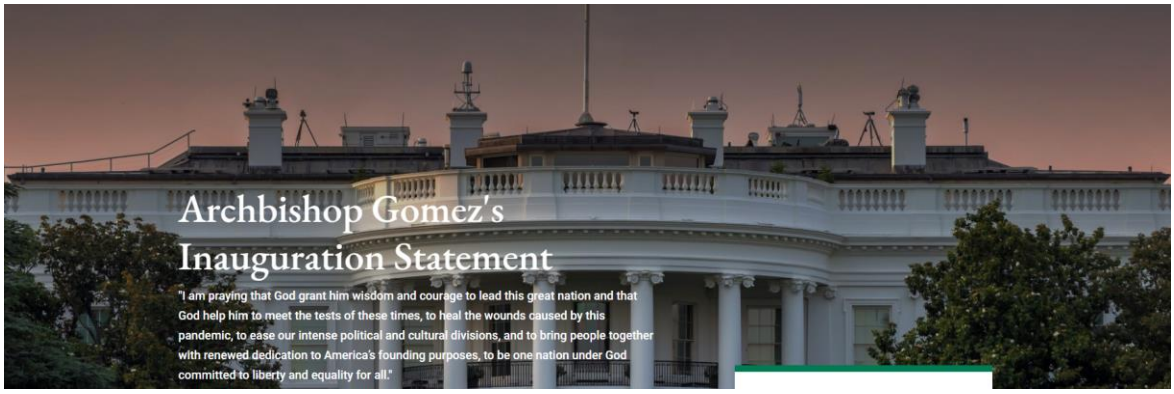
RAISING QUESTIONS ABOUT MAKING STATEMENTS

(January 22, 2021)

Catholic news is, itself, in the news. The latest kerfuffle concerns a statement from Archbishop Gomez (USCCB president) on the inauguration of President Biden, the intervention of the Vatican Secretariat of State, and the dust-up that followed among American bishops – along with a slew of opinionated comments on social media.



In light of the feast of the patron of Catholic writers and journalists (St. Francis de Sales, on January 24), perhaps it's time to revisit the practice of issuing episcopal statements.

Bishops exercise a special pedagogical authority in the Church. Being "successors of the Apostles as pastors of souls," and appointed "to teach all nations, to hallow men in the truth, and to feed them," they alone serve as "true and authentic teachers of the faith" (Vatican II, *Christus Dominus*, no. 2).

That teaching finds its primary medium in catechetical preaching, whether in liturgies or lectures. It also takes written form through pastoral letters, seasonal messages, and even ecumenical greetings.

These days, amid a 24/7 news cycle, the diocesan press office has become a new pulpit. Through it, "statements" issued to the media allow bishops to share their views on people and events making news locally, nationally, or internationally. Once the purview of public relations, this means of communication raises some questions about ecclesial leadership in the digital world.

The Church, while universal in mission and magnitude, operates locally, within a diocese or "particular church" defined as such by its geography. There the bishop's voice can and should be heard – by the faithful as an authoritative teacher and by others as a concerned leader committed to the good of all. Thus, it makes perfect sense for a church leader to comment on newsworthy matters significantly affecting the lives of people in his locale.

But no national diocese exists. Some bishops have greater prominence in the news world given their ecclesial rank (e.g. cardinals, archbishops), the size of the diocese they govern, or the prominence of the city in which they work. But we have no "bishop of the USA." As a result, the multiplication of statements can dilute a unified message. At best, issuing numerous statements creates information overload rather than theological insight or spiritual succor.

Even when bishops issue statements on national issues (after all, "all politics is local"), what ecclesial purpose do they serve? Is the communique intended to provide clarity (catechesis) or conviction (mystagogy)? Does this form of teaching offer food for the mind (meaning) or heart (care) or soul (guidance)?

Whatever the intent, "statements" suffer a fundamental flow. A pastoral letter is addressed to a particular group. A bishop's message is sent to someone. Episcopal greetings are extended to specific recipients. But for whom are statements made? Society as a whole? The general public? The believing community? Lacking a defined audience, statements transmitted into the digital ether risk falling unattended into empty space.

To guide their flocks effectively, the Church's shepherds do need to be engaged with breaking news and active in media relations. To do that efficaciously, bishops should consider the methodology of a fellow pastor of souls – Francis de Sales (1567-1622), Bishop of Geneva and Doctor of the Church.

Francis de Sales undertook ecclesial and diplomatic missions that involved contentious matters and oppositional forces. European "wars of religion" between and within Christian communities, along with the political machinations that instigated or accompanied them, gave rise to divisions on a scale much greater than today's partisan polemics.

Into this disunited world, Francis de Sales brought a distinctive brand of communications.

Specifically, he engaged in a highly successful press action. To teach about doctrinal matters, he wrote pamphlets about articles of the faith. He distributed these to townspeople who, owing to fear or constraint, would not listen to him preach. That innovativeness factored prominently in his being declared the patron of journalists (by Pope Pius XI in 1923).

More generally, Francis de Sales communicated personally and personably. He courageously interacted with his adversaries, whom he regarded always with Christian esteem. According to Fr. Joseph Chorpenning, the Salesian method set Francis apart from both the violence by which Calvinists coerced the citizenry and the aggression employed by fellow Catholic missionaries. He won people's hearts "through gentle persuasion, other-oriented dialogue that seeks common ground and restores unity through reconciliation, and humility in the service of collaborative ministry that was often difficult and challenging."

In today's challenging world, where commentary now dominates the media, "statements" formulated as episcopal teaching seek to shape social understanding and action. In making them, and in commenting about them, perhaps we could all turn again to the example of Francis de Sales, whose own approach to Church communications made of him "the gentleman saint."

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GETTING "WOKE" TO CONFESSION

(March 19, 2021)

The "cancel culture" movement seems to be gaining ground. We have "progressed" from tearing down statues to removing food labels to censoring books and cartoons. Now toys have become targets of the woke warriors.

Society, it seems, has taken the offensive against being offended. No stones are cast in this new version of public judgment, but Twitter flames are fanned in the hope of silencing the suspect and trouncing their transgressions.

Throughout the history of the Church, a different kind of cancelling movement has been operative. It proceeds from a different mentality and advances toward a different goal. It's called Confession.

In its own way, this sacrament is also counter cultural. Centuries ago, St. Francis de Sales (1567-1622) penned a brief commentary ("Advice to Confessors") that awakens us to how and why.

Today's movement appears justified as a quest to eradicate remnants of social wrongs that have long gone unnoticed. Confession seems to have the same focus, as penitents admit to wrongdoings in their own lives. Admitting to sins – "in what I have done and what I have failed to do" – shines an uncomfortable light on anyone's personal past.

But as a sacrament, and not merely a therapeutic exercise of self-examination, Confession is primarily about the present moment. Its emphasis is not the past, but the now of experiencing divine grace that renders the penitent worthier than before. As the saint reminds us, "confession and penance render a man infinitely more honorable than sin renders him blamable."

Sadly, for many people that truth has been marred by experiences that focused more on the blame than on the honor. Far too many are the stories of priests chiding penitents harshly for the faults that have burdened them, or of questioning them so extensively as to make confession more like an inquisition.

Cancel culture may come with outrage, but Confession never should.

As the saintly Bishop of Geneva advises the priests of his diocese: "Remember that at the beginning of their confessions the poor penitents call you 'Father,' and that you must indeed have a fatherly heart toward them." Acknowledging that confessors "so austere in (their) corrections ... are more blamable than (the) penitents are culpable," he reminds priests that "being sinners themselves (they) are obliged to be humble, meek, and to lower themselves with the penitents by a gentle condescension."

Still, the experience of confessing one's sins can be uncomfortable, even shameful. Wokeness may want to excite that kind of emotion in society so as to rage against wrong. But in persons going to Confession, that feeling usually make them rather apprehensive.

Again St. Francis de Sales offers a counter view, when he assures us that "the greater our misery, the more is the mercy of God glorified." Consider, he says, the great saints who were also great sinners (e.g., St. Peter, St. Matthew, St. Mary Magdalene). Recall, too, the words of Jesus who "prayed to his Father for those who crucified him, to let us know that even if we were to crucify him with our own hands, he would willingly pardon us."

From that biblical revelation, he concludes that "we can do no greater wrong to the goodness of God and to the Passion and Death of our Lord than to have a lack of confidence of obtaining pardon for our iniquities."

The season of Lent seeks to instill this confidence, as we journey toward that Paschal Mystery by which our Lord has redeemed the world and brought sinners – us included – to salvation. We best prepare for this by confidently entrusting ourselves to the mercy of God, which is communicated to us uniquely and experientially in the sacrament of Confession.

Whether it has been weeks or months, years or even decades, the opportunity to be unburdened, to be forgiven, to be at peace awaits. No statues need to fall, no labels to be removed, no books to be banned.

Instead, what gets cancelled when we celebrate the sacrament of Confession is sin, and what will get restored is us, through the unfathomable and unending mercy of God. As Pope Francis remarked in his very first Angelus address eight years ago this week, "God never ever tires of forgiving us" despite our hesitancy to ask at all or to ask yet again.

To ask forgiveness in Confession is to join and benefit from the Church's counter-cultural movement, one that through grace will bring not the cancellation of culture but its reconciliation.

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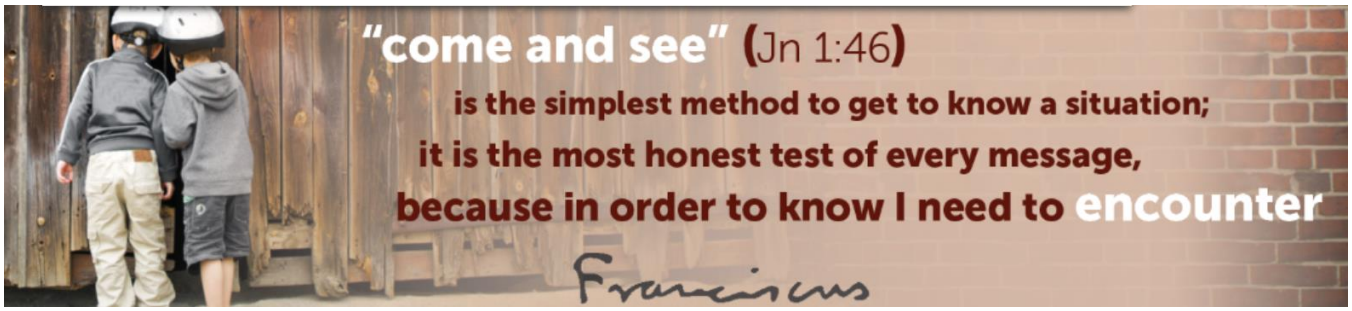
THE JOY OF FAITH UNMASKED

(May 21, 2021)

The light at the end of the pandemic's tunnel is getting brighter. The Archdiocese of Philadelphia recently announced the easing of COVID restrictions for parish churches. Concomitantly, it launched a new initiative – "Nothing compares to being there" – to encourage the return of the faithful to in-person worship.

Being unmasked does more than make a visage visible. It facilitates a fuller communication by enabling the whole person to "speak" even without words. It makes possible a deeper sight of the other person, in the very uniqueness that their face reveals. It enables an encounter with others as they are.

That experience lies at the heart of Pope Francis's message for this year's World Communications Day (celebrated on the Sunday before Pentecost). Entitled "Come and See," the message highlights the importance of face-to-face communication.



The Holy Father points out what we all know from experience, an experience that has been somewhat impeded by having to wear masks. "Some things can only be learned through first-hand experience," he writes, because "we do not communicate merely with words, but with our eyes, the tone of our voice and our gestures."

More than a sociological statement, this truth of communications points also to the distinctiveness of Christian faith. St. John writes of this in one of his letters. "No one has ever seen God," he admits. But then he makes a unique claim: "we have seen and testify that the Father sent his Son as savior of the world" (I John 4:11,14). Not only that, the Apostles also saw Jesus raised from the dead and watched as He ascended to heaven.

As Pope Francis explains, "Jesus' attractiveness to those who met him depended on the truth of his preaching; yet the effectiveness of what he said was inseparable from how he looked at others, from how he acted towards them, and even from his silence. The disciples not only listened to his words; they watched him speak."

Those sights and sights remain the foundation of our faith. They draw us to a God who is real, the God who is also a person, the God whom we are invited to encounter. "Indeed," says Pope Francis, "in him – the incarnate *Logos* – the Word took on a face; the invisible God let himself be seen, heard and touched."

Now, as then, faces speak, which is why being able to see them again makes us so elated. So, too, when we are unmasked, we will have the opportunity to let others see our faces – and, potentially, the joy of the Spirit that shines forth from them.

That joy, and the happiness of seeing smiles, is what enthuses us about no longer having to wear masks. It's also a reminder of what makes evangelizing really effective – the conviction of our own faith made evident in the joy of knowing the Good News of salvation.

As Pope Francis puts it in the conclusion to his message: "the Gospel comes alive in our own day, whenever we accept the compelling witness of people whose lives have been changed by their encounter with Jesus. For two millennia, a chain of such encounters has communicated the attractiveness of the Christian adventure. The challenge that awaits us, then, is to communicate by encountering people, where they are and as they are."

That witness can and has been communicated through various forms of social media – which parishes would be wise to carry on purposefully as a means of reaching out to and building up the faith community beyond the walls of a church. But an unparalleled experience of that Gospel encounter happens in the celebration of the Mass – where our lives are renovated and renewed by directly hearing the sacred Word and tangibly receiving the blessed Sacrament.

The event of our redemption celebrated on Sundays remains the foundation of our faith. It follows, undeniably, that an unmediated celebration of that event remains our fullest way of encountering the Lord Jesus.

But simply being there, even in-person and unmasked, will not suffice. To re-engage the faithful, we need to consider what it is that parishioners will "come and see" when they return to worship in parish churches? What have we learned from this time apart that we need to do differently and do better in order for our liturgical celebrations to communicate the attractiveness of the Christian adventure?

With the outpouring of the Holy Spirit this Pentecost, may our unmasked faces once again radiate the joy of the faith we have in God and share with one another.

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Commemorating World Communications Day, the Seminary will host the annual John Cardinal Foley Symposium on May 27 at 7:00 p.m. This year's featured guest is John Quiñones from ABC News. Online participation in the panel discussion and award presentation is welcome. Further information can be found online.

http://www.scs.edu/cardinal-foley-symposium

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JOHN CARDINAL FOLEY
SYMPOSIUM

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THE SACRED HEART OF JESUS AS A "SCHOOL OF LOVE"

(June 7, 2021)

Centuries ago, ST. FRANCIS DE SALES (1567-1622) envisioned the future of the world as one in which all hearts, both human and divine, would be connected in a harmonious state of life and love.

But it's pretty clear from human history, that we have not arrived there; in fact, our contemporary experience demonstrates that we have a long way to go.

This week's solemnity of the Sacred Heart of Jesus celebrates how to get there.

Our journey to eternal life has begun and has been set on the right course thanks to God's "visitation" of this world in the person of His Son, Jesus. In His life, death, Resurrection, and Ascension, we discover all that we need for our eternal salvation.

Particularly on the Cross, where His Sacred Heart is pierced open to pour out the full graces of redemption (John 19:33-37), we see what God's love means, what it has done for us, and what it enables us to do in response.

In his *Treatise on the Love of God*, Francis de Sales offers his own response to encountering that Sacred Heart. With poetic reverie, he writes: "O love eternal, my soul needs and chooses you eternally!" And he prays, "Come Holy Spirit, and inflame our hearts with your love ... so that we may not die eternally," but "may live in your eternal love, O Savior of our souls."

Later, that mystical wisdom comes to full expression in the revelations of Jesus to ST. MARGARET MARY ALACOQUE (1647-1690), a nun in the Order of the Visitation of Holy Mary, which was founded by St. Francis de Sales and St. Jane de Chantal. From her visionary experiences of the Sacred Heart, today's form of the devotion has arisen.

We, too, can comprehend the love of Christ for us and for all humanity by gazing prayerfully upon that sacred image and icon. Jesus, Himself, tells us as much — in the only autobiographical description of His heart:

"Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light" (Matt. 11:28–30).

That alluring invitation draws us to tap into a new reality and respond to the divine plea by learning what Jesus wishes to reveal to His own "little children."

To all those who desire happiness, He says, "*Come to me*" — not to the self-proclaimed and self-serving followers of secular culture, whose perspectives are limited to this world.

To all who seek meaning in life, He insists, "*Learn from me*" — rather than trusting in partial human knowledge and being guided by passions and inclinations, fickle as these will be.

He can claim, "*I am gentle*," for His deeds show love and mercy shared with all the world, despite our indifference toward Him and our sins against Him.

And He rightly identifies Himself as "lowly in *heart*," for He has need of nothing for Himself, but wants only for us to know how much we are loved and for us to return love for love by how we treat one another.

That's the love that alone gives *rest for* our *souls*, the love manifest to us in the Heart of Jesus. To quote St. Margaret Mary, the Sacred Heart reveals "all its treasures of love, mercy, grace, sanctification, and salvation ... in order that those who were willing to do all in their power to render and procure for Him honor, love, and glory might be enriched abundantly, even profusely, with these divine treasures of the Heart of God, which is their source."

Meditating upon the Gospel images of Jesus's heart, we can appreciate and appropriate the love of Christ for us. For each time we gaze prayerfully upon that icon of divine love, something else happens. Not only do we look upon it, but also it looks back at us.

Contemplating the Sacred Heart of Jesus draws us into a personal encounter with Him and invites us to dare to come close to love itself. There we can experience saving grace when we surrender our sins, our wounds, even our desires to Him who has opened His Heart for us with such indescribable mercy.

Seeing the heart of Christ, and being seen by it, helps us realize that our best hope in this world lies not in the fleeting emotions of our human hearts, but in the steadfast power of divine love.

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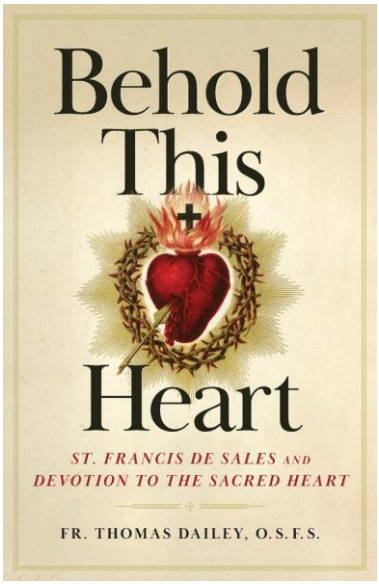

https://www.sophiainstitute.com/products/item/behold-this-heart

COHERENCE HAPPENS FIRST IN THE MIND

(8/5/21)

The late Richard John Neuhaus once described the Liturgy of the Word on Sundays as "the preliminary to be endured on the way to the Liturgy of the Eucharist." Put differently, all those words, especially the homily, are what people in the pews have to put up with before they can get what they came for.

Neuhaus wasn't bemoaning the sad state of Catholic preaching, as much as he was pointing to the low expectations of Catholic congregants, who typically "go to church to be encountered by the Real Presence of Christ in the Mass, not to hear a sermon."

It's certainly true that there's a long build-up at Mass before receiving Holy Communion. It's likewise true that preachers may try to say too much! Some even show their frustration at this verbal overload by heading straight out the door as soon as they've gotten what they came for.

Nowadays, talk about Holy Communion seems focused more on what happens outside the church doors. A debate has arisen about Eucharistic "coherence," in reference to the relationship between believing what the Church believes and acting in a way contrary to that belief. For those whose professed faith and public life do not align, the act of receiving Holy Communion would appear to lack coherence.

But coherence happens first in the mind, where it remains a concern for all believers. The current Gospel readings from the Bread of Life discourse in the Gospel of John suggest this starting point.

What is it that we come to "get" at Mass on Sundays? A host? A blessed sacrament? A bit of grace?

Even if the response is "all of the above," the answer is flawed. Seeking to get something is a short-sighted motivation for what happens on Sundays.

Jesus indicates this in his comments to the crowd that followed him across the sea. They saw him miraculously feed 5,000 people with just five loaves of bread; the villagers got more than enough to eat, with leftovers filling twelve wicker baskets. When those people then follow him in search of getting more, Jesus stops them in their tracks:

"Amen, amen, I say to you, you are looking for me not because you saw signs but because you ate the loaves and were filled. Do not work for food that perishes but for the food that endures for eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you" (John 6:26-27).

The problem to which Jesus points is the futility we face in human life. We may eat and be filled, but we always get hungry again! The emptiness of not just our stomachs never completely goes away.

Characteristic of human existence as such, St. Paul describes it as "the futility of (our) minds" (Eph. 4:17). For despite our good desires and our best efforts to fulfill them, we know that everything in

this life will, at some point, go away. Money earned is spent. Summer vacations end. Even those we love will, one day, depart from us.

Only food that lasts forever can ultimately be satisfying. And when the crowds mistakenly ask for some of "that" bread, Jesus disavows them of their futile thinking. Emphatically he says, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never hunger, and whoever believes in me will never thirst" (John 6:35).

It's not a "what" that fulfills our human longings, only a "who." Jesus offers himself as the one who, alone, can overcome the futility of life. He opens to us the horizon of eternity, in which everything in this life – from hunger and thirst to success and failure, pleasure and pain, happiness and sadness – everything is put into a new perspective.

On Sundays, when we hear Jesus say "this (bread) is my body," that is what we get – a taste of eternal life, in the real presence of the God whose life that is. When the truth of this central tenet of our faith becomes coherent in our minds, first, then it has the power to transform how we live.

To facilitate that coherence, all those preliminary words matter more than we tend to think. Some words we say or sing; others are proclaimed for us to listen to attentively, including the homily! All of them are not simply to be endured; they have for their purpose identifying Him, understanding Him, and appreciating Him whom we have come to encounter, in a sacred event that, when we truly believe it, can change our lives forever.

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HAIL, THE KING OF ME

(11/24/21)

On weekdays, usually before the sun comes up, I make my way to a nearby monastery to celebrate Mass. Each day, after arriving and before the chapel bell rings, I see him. Clothed in a sweatshirt and reflective vest, with a ski hat keeping his noggin warm, he waves as he walks by, intent on completing his task.

His morning routine takes on nature's nightly doing. Fallen branches dot the landscape, while runaway leaves clutter the small parking lot. And so he rakes. And rakes. And rakes. And piles it up on a tarp, which he then drags away to be deposited out of the sisters' sight. Along the way, he always stops to reposition the single rose planted beside the statue of St. Joseph.

Watching this daily, it struck me that the Solemnity of Christ the King may just be too big for us.

Certainly, we should celebrate that divine appellation. The kingship of Jesus was acknowledged at his birth, by a heavenly star and earthly magi. It was proclaimed at his death, not only by the repentant thief who begged to be remembered in His kingdom, but also by an empirical placard identifying him as "Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews."

Rightly, then, does the Church worship Him whom the Book of Revelation discloses as "the Alpha and the Omega ... the one who is and who was and who is to come, the almighty."

Yes, the feast is fitting. And it is not.

Undoubtedly, the grand vision of "dominion, glory, and kingship" over "all people, nations, and languages" that Daniel describes is theologically accurate in terms of who Jesus is. We proclaim Jesus as "king" not just of a nation or an empire or the world, but as king of the entire universe!

That's huge. Indeed, it's so big that it's hard to comprehend, too spectacular for us to grasp in a meaningful way.

The problem becomes apparent when we compare it to what we can see. Those who are subjects of a king usually admire him from afar, or in a moment of passing by here or there, often proud to call themselves his subjects. But after such a rare and distant encounter, they have to return to the mundane routine of their lives. Royalty, in places where kings still exist, seems not to have any real impact on people's day-to-day lives.

Perhaps, then we should not only look to Jesus as King of the universe, but consider instead whether He is King of me.

That's the question asked in the Gospel passage on the last Sunday of the liturgical year. There the kingship of Jesus is revealed in a simple, direct, one-on-one conversation.

Pilate asks Jesus: "Are you the king of the Jews?" Jesus answers affirmatively, though indirectly, linking his royal authority to a "kingdom (that) does not belong to this world."

The power of Christ's kingship comes not from military force or political influence, as it does in the logic of this world's rulers, but from the "truth" – the truth that He reveals in His words and His deeds, the truth that God is love, that mercy is His might, that reconciliation is how He rules. The power of that truth becomes evident on the Cross, on that unique and particular throne where sacrificial love triumphs over the self-serving sin of the world.

None of that matters to Pilate. He accedes to the clamor of the crowd. He allows the crucifixion to take place. He posts a sign summarizing the supposed crime.

But that sign matters to us. It's why we go to church, on this solemnity and every Sunday that we gather to worship. As Christians, we believe in our minds and hearts that "everyone who belongs to the truth listens to (His) voice."

We want to belong to that truth. We desire it. We long for it. We remain restless in this world until His kingdom comes.

That restlessness is eased by acknowledging Christ as King – not just as king of the universe, but as my king, our king, the One whose reign envelops the world not with royal splendor but with the everyday wonder of a God who never ceases to care for His people despite our wavering loyalty.

When we belong to that truth, we don't just admire Jesus from afar. We see Him in the daily displays of his kingdom, in the leaves and branches of our everyday tasks, where no matter our vocation, we pray that God's will be done. And when we listen to that voice in our hearts, we will know why nothing compares to being in this King's presence each and every week.

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