

IN HIS MAJESTY'S NOT-SO-SECRET SERVICE

Sermon, November 26, 2017

Christ the King Sunday

Texts: Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24; Matthew 25:31-46



I'm sure many of you know the meaning of the monograms that grace our paraments, but it doesn't hurt to review. First, the PX. No, we are not a drug store or a doctor's office, where you often see PX used as an abbreviation for "prognosis" or "prescription." Nor are we the military PX, where the PX is short for Post Exchange, the military base retail store, the commissary. These letters PX are actually two Greek

Historians differ as to what these two letters signify. Most say it was simply the first two letters of Christ in Greek (Χριστός); Chi and Rho. Others say it is a something of a royal monogram, X being the first letter of Christ and Rho being the Greek equivalent of the Latin R, and Rex is Latin for king. Think of the modern royal monogram of the longest reigning monarch in British history (*the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II as monarch of the United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, Pakistan and Ceylon took place on June 2, 1953 at Westminster Abbey in London*). Queen Elizabeth's royal monogram has three symbols: E, for Elizabeth; the Roman numeral 2 (II), and R, for Regina, which is Latin for Queen.



Α α alpha	Ν ν nu
Β β beta	Ξ ξ ksi
Γ γ gamma	Ο ο omicron
Δ δ delta	Π π pi
Ε ε epsilon	Ρ ρ rho
Ζ ζ zeta	Σ σς sigma
Η η eta	Τ τ tau
Θ θ theta	Υ υ upsilon
Ι ι iota	Φ φ phi
Κ κ kappa	Χ χ chi
Λ λ lambda	Ψ ψ psi
Μ μ mu	Ω ω omega

Fourth century scholar Eusebius of Caesarea tells of a vision the Roman Emperor Constantine saw in the noon-day sky October 27, 312 A.D., the day before a decisive battle at the Milvian Bridge. Constantine reported to Eusebius that he and his whole army saw a bright cross of light against the noonday sky and upon it the inscription: "*In Hoc Signo Vinces*" which translated means, "*In this Sign, Conquer.*" (or, more properly, "*In this sign, you will conquer.*") Constantine went on to win that battle the next day, he then converted to Christianity; those of you who know your history know this led to the Christianization of the entire Roman Empire. After that battle, by the way, he decided the Chi Rho emblem would be the royal emblem, and the shields of the Roman military were emblazoned with it.



Some historians argue that the origin for the monogram IHS was the first letter of the first three words in Constantine's vision: "*In Hoc Signo.*" However, historians differ ... the IHS symbol has at least four and up to six or seven interpretations; the origin seems to have been lost in history. Other historians argue IHS represents the three Latin initials of "*Jesus Hominum Salvator*" ... "*Jesus, Savior of Humanity.*" Still others argue no, IHS simply represents the Latin equivalent of the first three Greek letters of the name Jesus ... iota, (h)eta, sigma ... thus, it's an abbreviation of the name Jesus. In the 16th century; Ignatius of Loyola made IHS the monogram of the Jesuits, changing it to "*Jesus Humilis Societas*" the Humble Society of Jesus. One more interpretation of IHS is from Stephen of Pennsylvania ... up until I was 14 years old, I thought it meant "In His Service" (*and as I've found over the years, many in the churches I've served think that's the meaning, as well!*). Well, they **all** work this Christ the King Sunday! *In Hoc Signo*, in the sign of Christ the King, we, his Humble Society, will indeed be victorious as we live life In His Service!

Some of you may remember Christ the King Sunday was first established in 1925 by Pope Pius XI (*his given name was Ambrogio Damiano Achille Ratti*). In that same year 1925 in Italy, Benito Mussolini had just claimed the title, "Il Duce", declaring himself dictator and was pursuing his fascist program designed to recapture for Italy the glory that had been ancient Rome's. In the year 1925 in Germany, Adolf Hitler's manifesto Mein Kampf was widely distributed throughout the nation, and National Socialism was on the rise (*little historical trivia: the original title was Four and a Half Years of Struggle against Lies, Stupidity, and Cowardice; that was edited down to My Struggle, or Mein Kampf*). In that same year 1925 in the nation of Russia, with Lenin dead and Trotsky banished, the murderous thug Josef Stalin was in full power establishing the Communist "utopia" of the Soviet Union. It was also in 1925 that George Bernard Shaw was compelled to write: "*If the other planets are inhabited, they must be using the earth as their insane asylum.*" It was into that tumultuous political climate of 1925 that Pope Pius XI sent his encyclical Quas Primas, which established the commemoration of Christ the King Sunday we celebrate today. He was also writing in the aftermath of World War I, which saw the fall of the grand historic and powerful dynasties of the Hohenzollerns, the Romanovs, the Habsburgs, and the Ottomans. Pope Pius XI wanted to direct attention to a King "... whose kingdom shall have no end."

As a somewhat related aside, I'd like to point out we marked a monumental centennial anniversary this month. For whatever reason(s), we didn't see much, if anything, about this in the news. Reported or not, though, our world marked a grim centennial. Exactly one hundred years ago November 7, in 1917, the Bolsheviks staged a successful coup d'etat. By the end of that year, Vladimir Lenin and his fellow extremists were able to impose

control over much of Russia. A massive bloodbath followed. The effect on Europe and the world was profound. The Bolsheviks normalized brutality on an unimaginable scale, and arguably inspired the later rise of Mussolini's fascism and Hitler's national socialism. In just twenty years (1918-38) the number of churches in Russia was reduced from 54,000 to under 500; in fact, there have been many more Christian martyrs in the 20th century — by some estimates, over 45 million -- than in all of the preceding nineteen centuries of Christianity *combined*. By the time of the fall of the Berlin Wall, seven decades later, the disciples of Lenin had murdered or starved to death at least 100 million human beings world wide. ¹ The numbers are simply staggering ... the lowest estimates of Soviet Union citizens starved, executed or otherwise killed under Stalin's rule alone are 20 million, higher estimates range up to 55 million. His regime was much more brutal than Hitler's. Stalin was possibly outdone by Mao Tse Tung in the 50s and 60s; between 40 and 70 million Chinese perished as a result of the implementation of Mao's communist policies. We should never forget the apparent success that appears as modern China is built over a *massive* graveyard. And I've not included Korea, Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, Cuba ...and those are only the "official" communist nations. The historical record is clear: The communist ideology has a treacherous, deadly and, frankly, evil legacy. (FYI, I learned the communist party in the United States was reorganized in May 2014, and renamed the *Party of Communists in the USA* ... which gives it the unfortunate acronym of the *PCUSA*. Yikes!)

Anyway, back to 1925. As Pius XI witnessed the rise of these dictatorships, he was dismayed by how many Christians were either being taken in by these tyrants with their grand designs and lofty promises of earthly utopias, or were being murdered by them. He wanted to reiterate that no matter how things may seem, all will kneel sooner or later to Christ as King and to Him "... all majesty ascribe and crown Him Lord of all!" ... and that means everyone. Paragraph 19 of *Quas Primas*: "*When once men recognize, both in private and in public life, that Christ is King, [then and only then will] society at last receive the great blessings of real liberty, well-ordered discipline, peace and harmony. (emphasis added – slc)*" That's the original vision of Christ the King Sunday.

Is Jesus Christ our King, our Lord? If so, good! Let's do our level best to *demonstrate* it, "*both in private and in public life,*" and conscientiously be (*with apologies to Ian Fleming*) on our Majesty's not-so-secret service! If Christ is our King, that means we openly and consistently and visibly and honorably serve Him. If you're new at this and need a quick primer, then take a fast trip through Christ our King's Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5-7 which describes kingdom living! He tells us there that angry words, insulting words, are out. He tells us there that if Christ is our King, we will seek to control our bodily appetites and our lusts and even our thoughts. He tells us that living life "IHS" means we will seek to be faithful to our promises, scrupulously honest in all our dealings, and have all our words be trustworthy and true. Kingdom living means we will go above and beyond the call of duty in response to appeals for help. If Christ is our King, that means we will care for the welfare of our neighbor AND the welfare of our enemy. If Christ is our King, possessions will have their rightful place; we will "own" our possessions and be good stewards of them, but we will not let them "own" us. Our faith will show, but it will not be show-y; it'll be sincere, heart-felt, genuine, part and parcel of everything we say and do. Kingdom living means we will not be judgmental, but we will certainly learn and practice good judgment, and will trust God to meet our needs. That's a very quick primer summary of those early chapters of Matthew, but that should be enough to get started!

Just a very quick glance at the two lectionary readings for Christ the King Sunday: In the Old Testament, the context is the prophet has announced God's judgment on Israel's kings. Called to be shepherds of the people, they have abused their privileges, misused their power, had not acknowledged God as King, took care of themselves and not the people in their charge, and the people have suffered for it. The prophet promises a time when God Himself will come to be the people's shepherd. He will give them another king from the house of David, the king Israel knew in her days of glory. This King will be first and foremost a shepherd, One who gives himself to the care and nurture and well-being of His people. And in our New Testament reading from Matthew this very same King, the one prophesied in Ezekiel, calls His people to do likewise, to give themselves to the care and nurture and well-being of His people. Jesus insinuates that any form of service to another in need is seen as service to the King Himself. Have you attended to the needs of those who are in need: the lost, the bereaved, the lonely, the naked, the sick and hungry (*and, by the way, these categories include all of us as some time or another!*)? In the words of Mother Theresa, "*We who meditate upon Jesus must then go out and look for Him in disguise.*"

The warning here is that it is possible to know about Jesus, believe in Jesus, yet not serve Him as your King ... and that just won't do. The point, of course, is both to know Him and serve Him, to make Him our King ... PX ... and live out our private and public lives IHS ... In His Service *and* In Hoc Signo ... living honorably, confidently, sacrificially, securely and victoriously under the sign of His cross.

And for the record, our King can be found AND served wherever there is someone in need of a savior.

¹ See <https://www.chroniclesmagazine.org/a-grim-centennial>