Pope Pius XI established the feast of Christ the King in 1925, and one of his main reasons for doing so was the growing number of anticlerical regimes in the world, which embraced Marxist ideologies and sought to limit or eliminate the Church’s power. The pope therefore wished to emphasize something that had always been true but had lately been forgotten: namely, that Jesus Christ is the king of the universe; he is King of kings and Lord of lords; he, alone, has supreme power over all things. All earthly rulers derive whatever legitimate power and authority they have from him – whether they know it or not.

The Holy Father explained what Christ’s kingship meant for the Church – how “the Church… 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… she cannot be subject to any external power”. This is not a principle that the Church merely asserts, gratuitously; rather, it is revealed by God himself. Remember how Christ said to Peter, “Upon this rock I will build my Church… whatever you bind on earth, will be bound in heaven”. He later used that same language, not only speaking to Peter but to all the apostles. On another occasion he said to them, “He who hears you hears me”. And before he ascended into heaven he gave his apostles the mandate to bring his message to all peoples everywhere. The Church has been given a mandate by the Lord Jesus, who is a higher power than any earthly authority. Because of this, she always has the right and the duty to fulfill her mandate, free from any external coercion by the State.

We know that that right is not always respected, and that is why this feast day is still relevant. In our second reading today, St. Paul spoke of how Christ “must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet.” But who are the enemies of Christ? They are those who exercise their power and authority in a way that threatens his kingdom – the Kingdom of Heaven, and the Church, which is that kingdom on earth. Paul said that Christ “must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet.” This process of subjection, this process of bringing men and women of every race under God’s authority, is ongoing. In that sense, we all have a role to play in it, and that role starts at home, in each of our individual lives.

Christ is calling each of us to place our lives under his kingship. But this is not a pious platitude, something that sounds nice but is ultimately impractical: no, it is very real, and very concrete. Placing our lives under the kingship of Christ means giving ourselves entirely to him. If the Lord’s power is sovereign and absolute, then he has a right to every aspect of who we are – not just a portion. And living this is particularly challenging in our culture today, in which more and more of the Church’s teachings are routinely opposed – an opposition that happens not just on the level of popular opinion, but also on the level of government legislation and action.

A line is being drawn in the sand, as it were, and the division between two sides is becoming clearer: those who adhere to Christ and all his teachings, on the one side, and those who are openly opposed to it or only casually engaged with it, on the other. The gospel tells us about another division that will take place: at the final judgment. The “sheep” – those who have followed and served the Lord faithfully – will be placed at his right hand, which is heaven. The “goats” will be placed at his left hand, and go to the “eternal fire”, which is hell. On this last Sunday of the Church’s liturgical year, it is worthwhile for us to think about that last day that

1 Cf. Revelation 19:16.
2 Pope Pius XI. Encyclical Letter Quas primas, no. 31.
3 Matthew 16:18-19.
4 Cf. Matthew 18:18.
each one of us will face, and the fact that how we live now affects the outcome. It is urgent that we acknowledge Christ’s kingship over every aspect of our lives – and strive to live consistently with it.

But the truth is, we are often afraid. We hesitate to open our hearts and homes entirely to the Lord – to give him all. Maybe he will take something away from us! In this regard, and in conclusion, I would like to share some important words from another previous pope – Benedict XVI. Here is how he ended the homily at his first public Mass as pope, back in 2005 – and how I conclude this homily now:

“At this point”, he said, “my mind goes back to 22 October 1978, when Pope John Paul II began his ministry here in Saint Peter’s Square. His words on that occasion constantly echo in my ears: ‘Be not afraid! Open wide the doors for Christ!’ The pope was addressing the mighty, the powerful of this world, who feared that Christ might take away something of their power if they were to let him in, if they were to allow the faith to be free. Yes, he would certainly have taken something away from them: the dominion of corruption, the manipulation of law, and the freedom to do as they pleased. But he would not have taken away anything that pertains to human freedom or dignity, or to the building of a just society. The pope was also speaking to everyone, especially the young. Are we not perhaps all afraid in some way? If we let Christ enter fully into our lives, if we open ourselves totally to him, are we not afraid that he might take something away from us? Are we not perhaps afraid to give up something significant, something unique, something that makes life so beautiful?... And once again the pope said: No! If we let Christ into our lives, we lose nothing..., absolutely nothing of what makes life free, beautiful and great. No! Only in this friendship are the doors of life opened wide. Only in this friendship is the great potential of human existence truly revealed. Only in this friendship do we experience beauty and liberation. And so, today, with great strength and great conviction,... I say to you…: Do not be afraid of Christ! He takes nothing away, and he gives you everything. When we give ourselves to him, we receive a hundredfold in return. Yes, open, open wide the doors to Christ – and you will find true life. Amen.”

7 Pope Benedict XVI, Homily For the Inauguration of the Pontificate, 24 April 2005.