THE KINGDOM WITHOUT END

A RETREAT GUIDE ON CHRIST THE KING

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INTRODUCTION

The Kingdom without End

RETREAT OVERVIEW

Every Sunday when we pray the Creed at Mass we profess our faith in Jesus Christ, affirming that "he will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his Kingdom will have no end."

Every time we pray the Our Father, the prayer Jesus himself taught us, we directly ask for the coming of that same Kingdom when we say, "Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven."

This seems like an important point for Christ's followers to keep in mind. And yet, how often do we actually think about it? How deeply have we considered it? What really comes into our minds when we read the Bible passages that speak to us about Christ's Kingship and his Kingdom?

Those are some of the questions we will explore in this retreat guide: *The Kingdom without End: A Retreat Guide on Christ the King*.

- The First Meditation will unfold the historical origins of the liturgical celebration of Christ the King—and why they matter.

- The Second Meditation will focus on the throne that Christ chose for himself, and what it can teach us about our King and his Kingdom.

- And the Conference will show how the Beatitudes reveal what it means for us to be active, faithful citizens of Christ's Kingdom.

Let's begin, in the quiet of our hearts, by turning our attention to God, who never stops paying attention to

us. Let's ask him for all the graces we need, and most especially for the grace to know, love, and follow more closely than ever, Christ, our eternal King.

NOTES

FIRST MEDITATION

Why Have a Feast of Christ the King?

INTRODUCTION

Every year, the Church dedicates the last Sunday of Ordinary Time to commemorate Christ's Kingship through the liturgical celebration of the Solemnity of Our Lord Jesus Christ, King of the Universe—also known simply as the feast of Christ the King.

Comparatively speaking, this is a new addition to the liturgical year. It was instituted by Pope Pius XI in 1925. And he made very clear the reasons behind his decision in his encyclical letter, *Quas Primas*.

THE PLAGUE OF SECULARISM

The world in 1925 was still recovering from World War I, which had claimed the lives of more than 16 million people and thoroughly destabilized the global geo-political landscape. In 1925 three secular ideologies that would cause immeasurable damage to the whole human family were already beginning to take root: communism, fascism, and Nazism. Violence, injustice, and religious persecution were bubbling up in various parts of the world, and the Pope wanted to intervene before they exploded.

In the very first paragraph of his encyclical he explained that the roots of these social evils were to be found in the ever-more dominant secularist worldview that sees God, Christ, and the Church as enemies of the common good. He wrote:

> … [T]hese manifold evils in the world were due to the fact that the majority of men had thrust Jesus Christ and his holy law out of their lives;

> that these had no place either in private affairs or in politics … as long as individuals and states refused to submit to the rule of our Savior, there would be no really hopeful prospect of a lasting peace among nations. Men must look for the *peace of Christ in the Kingdom of Christ.*

Later in the encyclical he actually calls this secular mindset a "devastating plague". Establishing the feast of Christ the King, he hoped, would help provide a cure. He wrote:

> If we ordain that the whole Catholic world shall revere Christ as King, We shall minister to the need of the present day, and at the same time provide an excellent remedy for the plague which now infects society. We refer to the plague of secularism[1], its errors and impious activities.
>
> —*Quas Primas, 24*

Later, he lists some of the more harmful consequences that come from trying to exclude Christ and his teaching from society. He was writing in 1925, but his words apply with equal accuracy to the more advanced secularization of our own day:

> The rebellion of individuals and states against the authority of Christ has produced deplorable consequences… the seeds of discord sown far and wide; those bitter enmities and rivalries between nations, which still hinder so much the cause of

1 The English translation at www.vatican.va uses the term "anti-clericalism," but the Latin original uses "laicismus", which is better translated today as secularism—the worldview which sees the key to lasting peace and prosperity in the elimination of God and religion from social life.

> peace; that insatiable greed which is so often hidden under a pretense of public spirit and patriotism, and gives rise to so many private quarrels; a blind and immoderate selfishness, making men seek nothing but their own comfort and advantage, and measure everything by these; no peace in the home, because men have forgotten or neglect their duty; the unity and stability of the family undermined; society in a word, shaken to its foundations and on the way to ruin.
>
> —*Quas Primas, 24*

Evils like those flow from attempts to build a flourishing society without accepting the guidance of Christ and the law of God.

COUNTERATTACKING THE SECULAR ADVANCE

And so, in the face of this turbulent and spreading secularism, Pius XI proposed that at the end of the liturgical year the whole Catholic Church publicly proclaim and renew our adherence to Christ and our loyalty to his Kingdom.

The feast of Christ the King, in other words, was a direct counterattack against secularism's attempt to build a godless society. It was meant to remind the world that God really is present and active among us through Christ and his Church. And it was meant to strengthen the hearts and minds of all Catholics, so that we would continue to defend and promote Christ's Kingdom as the path to true fulfillment, even in a world gone so crazy that it had rejected the only medicine that could cure it.

Here is how the Preface of the Mass for Christ the King puts it, addressing God the Father:

> For you anointed your Only Begotten Son,
> our Lord Jesus Christ, with the oil of gladness
> as eternal Priest and King of all creation, so that,
> by offering himself on the altar of the Cross as
> a spotless sacrifice to bring us peace, he might
> accomplish the mysteries of human redemption
> and, making all created things subject to his rule,
> he might present to the immensity of your majesty
> an eternal and universal kingdom, a kingdom of
> truth and life, a kingdom of holiness and grace,
> a kingdom of justice, love and peace.

We cannot have real justice, love, and peace in this world if we do not accept Christ's truth and grace, which alone lead to holiness and a meaningful life. *That* is the bottom-line message of the feast of Christ the King.

HOW SECULARIZED AM I?

A hundred years later, it may be worthwhile for each one of us to reflect on how deeply we believe that. After all, we are citizens of Christ's Kingdom, but right now we live in an earthly exile, in this secularized world. It's easy for us to be seduced by secularism's mindset, by thinking that God really isn't so necessary or relevant either for my fulfillment, or for a healthy society.

When Pope Benedict XVI visited the United States of America in 2008, he spoke about how easily we can be seduced by secularism. When he was addressing the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, he told them the following:

> It is easy to be entranced by the almost unlimited possibilities that science and technology place before us; it is easy to make the mistake of thinking we can obtain by our own efforts the fulfillment of our deepest needs. This is an illusion. Without God, who alone bestows upon us what we by ourselves cannot attain, our lives are ultimately empty. People need to be constantly reminded to cultivate a relationship with him who came that we might have life in abundance.[2]

How many advertisements remind us of that these days? How many series that we watch on the Internet remind us of that? How many movies or video games or educational curricula or political discourses remind us of that? Not too many. In spite of having instituted the feast of Christ the King back in 1925, in spite of the devastation wrought by so many secular ideologies in modern times, the secular worldview is alive and well and influencing our world. How much is it also influencing us?

In the next meditation, we will focus more on Christ himself. We will look at the throne he chose for his Kingdom, and what it tells us about what kind of King he really is. But for now, let's take some time, in the quiet of our hearts, to prayerfully reflect on the original meaning and purpose of the feast of Christ the King, and how that meaning and purpose can shape the way we celebrate that feast.

QUESTIONS FOR PERSONAL REFLECTION/GROUP DISCUSSION

2 Pope Benedict XVI, Address to Bishops of the United States, 16 April 2008

1. What has the feast of Christ the King meant for me up to this point in my life? What would I like it to mean for me from now on?

2. How would I describe the "plague of secularism" in my own words? Where do I see it at work around me?

3. How involved am I in promoting and defending Christian values in the different communities of which I am a member? How involved is the Lord asking me to be?

QUOTATIONS TO HELP YOUR PRAYER

… We are certainly not seduced by the naive expectation that, faced with the great challenges of our time, we shall find some magic formula. No, we shall not be saved by a formula but by a Person, and the assurance which he gives us: I am with you!... It is not therefore a matter of inventing a "new programme". The programme already exists: it is the plan found in the Gospel and in the living Tradition, it is the same as ever. Ultimately, it has its centre in Christ himself, who is to be known, loved and imitated, so that in him we may live the life of the Trinity, and with him transform history until its fulfilment in the heavenly Jerusalem. This is a programme which does not change with shifts of times and cultures …

—*Novo Millennio Ineunte,* 29
St. John Paul II

Then I saw the heavens opened, and there was a white horse; its rider was [called] "Faithful and

True." He judges and wages war in righteousness. His eyes were [like] a fiery flame, and on his head were many diadems. He had a name inscribed that no one knows except himself. He wore a cloak that had been dipped in blood, and his name was called the Word of God. The armies of heaven followed him, mounted on white horses and wearing clean white linen. Out of his mouth came a sharp sword to strike the nations. He will rule them with an iron rod, and he himself will tread out in the wine press the wine of the fury and wrath of God the almighty. He has a name written on his cloak and on his thigh, "King of kings and Lord of lords."

—Revelation 19:11–16
NABRE

Therefore, from the day we heard this, we do not cease praying for you and asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of his will through all spiritual wisdom and understanding to live in a manner worthy of the Lord, so as to be fully pleasing, in every good work bearing fruit and growing in the knowledge of God, strengthened with every power, in accord with his glorious might, for all endurance and patience, with joy giving thanks to the Father, who has made you fit to share in the inheritance of the holy ones in light. He delivered us from the power of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins

—Colossians 1:9–14
NABRE

NOTES

SECOND MEDITATION

Our King's Throne

INTRODUCTION

A lot of symbolism surrounds royalty. Think, for example, about the elaborate and moving ceremony involved in crowning a new king or queen of England. Every gesture is planned. Every song and every garment carries historical significance. The crown, the scepter, the throne—everything is meant to communicate the greatness, the nobility, and the power of this realm which traces its origins back more than a thousand years into the mists of history.

THE POWER OF SYMBOLS

It is fitting to surround royalty with profound and beautiful—and sometimes intimidating—symbols. The role of a ruler, after all, really matters. Rulers, whether royal or not, have been entrusted with the care of societies, nations, cultures, and sometimes even entire civilizations. Their decisions, which flow from their character and their wisdom, have a deep and immediate impact on the social environment in which thousands—or even millions—of people live out their lives.

When rulers promote authentic values, making just laws and enforcing them prudently, they create a good cultural environment where it is easier for people to live truly good and fulfilling lives. When they don't, they make it harder—sometimes much harder—for people to live truly good and fulfilling lives. As the Book of Proverbs puts it:

> A roaring lion or a ravenous bear
> is a wicked ruler over a poor people.
> the less prudent the rulers, the more oppressive
> their deeds …

When the just flourish, the people rejoice;
but when the wicked rule, the people groan.

—Proverbs 28:15–16; 29:2

Ceremonies and symbols surrounding thrones, palaces, and other royal trappings are meant to inspire rulers and people alike, and to help them respect and revere sacred traditions for the good of all.

A KING WHO CHOOSES HIS OWN THRONE

Most rulers come into already established kingdoms, and they inherit symbols, traditions, and laws with long histories. The Kingdom of God, however, the Kingdom promised by the prophets, established by Jesus, and perpetuated in the Church through the action of the Holy Spirit, is different. Christ himself, the Word of God made man and the King of the only Kingdom that will have no end, was free to choose the symbols surrounding his kingship. The liturgical readings for the Feast of Christ the King highlight some of them. By taking time to reflect on them, we can get to know our King better, and hopefully become better citizens of his Kingdom.

The central symbol of Christ's Kingdom is the throne he chose for himself: The Cross.

One of the Gospel readings for the feast of Christ the King presents us with our King reigning from this chosen throne. As he wears his crown of thorns and agonizes through his crucifixion, he exercises his power of judgment not only in earthly terms, but with eternal repercussions. Here is the passage from Luke's Gospel:

> The people stood by and watched; the rulers, meanwhile, sneered at him and said, "He saved others, let him save himself if he is the chosen one, the Messiah of God." Even the soldiers jeered at him. As they approached to offer him wine they called out, "If you are King of the Jews, save yourself." Above him there was an inscription that read, "This is the King of the Jews."
>
> —Luke 23:35–38

In earthly terms, this scene makes little sense. Jesus is the eternal king, all-powerful and infinitely wise, but here he appears weak and defeated. If Hollywood were to make a movie about such a king, and that king were to be treated this way by the very people he came to rule, he would surely use his power to free himself from the cross and force his persecutors to obey him or be destroyed.

But that's not what happens in the case of our King. Instead, Jesus stays on the cross. He dies there. He even forgives his tormentors and prays for them, as the previous verses point out. Jesus turns that instrument of humiliation, torture, and pain into his throne. St. Luke continues:

> Now one of the criminals hanging there reviled Jesus, saying, "Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us." The other, however, rebuking him, said in reply, "Have you no fear of God, for you are subject to the same condemnation? And indeed, we have been condemned justly, for the sentence we received corresponds to our crimes, but this man has done nothing criminal." Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into

your kingdom." He replied to him, "Amen, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise."

—Luke 23:39–42

One criminal joins his own mockery to that of the soldiers and the rulers. For all of them, a man dying on a cross cannot be a king, a messiah, a savior. But the other criminal somehow recognizes the cross as the throne of the eternal King, makes his petition, and receives the promise of its fulfillment.

Thrones for earthly kings are symbols of earthly power and authority. But Christ's throne, the throne he chose for himself, symbolizes something else—at least three things, actually, by its position, its material, and its location.[3]

A CURIOUS POSITION

Thrones are usually chairs. A royal leader sits in a throne and rules from a position of power and security.

Christ chose for his throne not a chair, but a cross. To step onto this throne, Jesus had to lower himself, to lay down so he could be nailed to the wood. The strength of his rule, of his kingship, comes from his humility, from his willingness to lay down his own life as a sacrifice to redeem us from our sins.

Jesus rules his Kingdom not by the strength of force, but by the strength of love. As St. John put it in his first Letter: "The way we came to know love was that he laid down

3 I first developed these three characteristics of Christ's chosen through in a Homily Pack for epriest.com. I have used some of the same concepts in this Retreat Guide, but presented them differently.

his life for us" (1 John 3:16). And Jesus himself explained this aspect of his kingship with stark clarity: "the Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Matthew 20:28).

Jesus doesn't demand that we do great things in order to enter into his kingdom of grace; all we have to do is admit our sinfulness, our need for forgiveness, and humbly accept the transforming gift of his love. That's what the good thief did, and he was rewarded with paradise—the first canonized saint in history, and all he did was recognize God's merciful love and accept it. Christ's Kingdom is a Kingdom built on the indestructible foundation of divine love.

SOME CURIOUS STUFF

The second notable characteristic of Christ's chosen throne is its material. Instead of gold, silk, velvet, and other precious substances and priceless jewels, Christ's throne is made of plain, rough wood and decorated with nothing but his own blood.

Jesus doesn't want to dazzle us with earthly glory; he wants to enlighten us with the truth of his mercy, his faithfulness, his patience, his humility, and his love. These are what give true meaning and value to life.

As we come to know God in all of his infinitely reliable goodness, we begin to discover the truth of our own worth and dignity in God's eyes. That discovery is the first step towards true interior freedom, as Jesus explained to his disciples: "If you remain in my word, you will truly be my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the

truth will set you free" (John 8:31–32). That discovery is also the first step towards the lasting joy Jesus promised to give his disciples: "I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and your joy may be complete" (John 15:11). Christ's Kingdom is a kingdom infused with the unquenchable light of everlasting truth.

A CURIOUS LOCATION

Finally, the third remarkable characteristic of this throne is its location. Unlike, for example, the medieval emperor Charlemagne's throne, elevated above his subjects by seven marble steps, and unlike the ancient imperial throne of China, located in the very center of the Forbidden City and approachable only rarely and by an elite few, Christ chose to be enthroned on an instrument of suffering, a Cross. Suffering is the most universal and inescapable human experience in this fallen world. And Jesus chooses to locate his throne right in the middle of it.

Jesus doesn't want to reign in our lives from a distance. He wants to accompany us, to be close to us, and to make it easy for us to come close to him. His everlasting Kingdom embraces and redeems us in our worst moments, in the moments when our weakness, our need, our limitations are most evident and most humiliating: in the midst of our suffering.

This is our King on his chosen throne with its unique position, material, and location: he lays down his life out of love for us; he reveals the deeper truths that sin has obscured, enlightening our path to spiritual freedom; and he reaches out his hand to comfort and accompany us in our misery and need.

In the Conference, we will reflect on how the grace of Christ's Kingdom can transform our daily living through the Beatitudes. But for now, let's prayerfully and gratefully reflect on the kind of King we have in Christ, and the kind of Kingdom that will have no end.

QUESTIONS FOR PERSONAL REFLECTION/GROUP DISCUSSION

1. When I look at a crucifix, Christ reigning from his throne, what do I usually think of? What is Jesus inviting me to think of?

2. Jesus wants to accompany me in my suffering. To what extent do I let him do that? How do I usually respond in the face of suffering and how could I make my response my more faith-filled?

3. What kind of petitions do I usually make to my King? How do they compare with the good thief's petition?

QUOTATIONS TO HELP YOUR PRAYER

> Then he said to all, "If anyone wishes to come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will save it. What profit is there for one to gain the whole world yet lose or forfeit himself? Whoever is ashamed of me and of my words, the Son of Man will be ashamed of when he comes in his glory and in the glory of the Father and of the holy angels. Truly I say to you,

there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see the kingdom of God."

—Luke 9:23–27
NABRE

It was now about noon and darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon because of an eclipse of the sun. Then the veil of the temple was torn down the middle. Jesus cried out in a loud voice, "Father, into your hands I commend my spirit"; and when he had said this he breathed his last. The centurion who witnessed what had happened glorified God and said, "This man was innocent beyond doubt." When all the people who had gathered for this spectacle saw what had happened, they returned home beating their breasts; but all his acquaintances stood at a distance, including the women who had followed him from Galilee and saw these events.

—Luke 23:44–49
NABRE

So Pilate went back into the praetorium and summoned Jesus and said to him, "Are you the King of the Jews?" Jesus answered, "Do you say this on your own or have others told you about me?" Pilate answered, "I am not a Jew, am I? Your own nation and the chief priests handed you over to me. What have you done?" Jesus answered, "My kingdom does not belong to this world. If my kingdom did belong to this world, my attendants [would] be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Jews. But as it is, my kingdom is not here." So Pilate said to him, "Then you are a king?" Jesus answered,

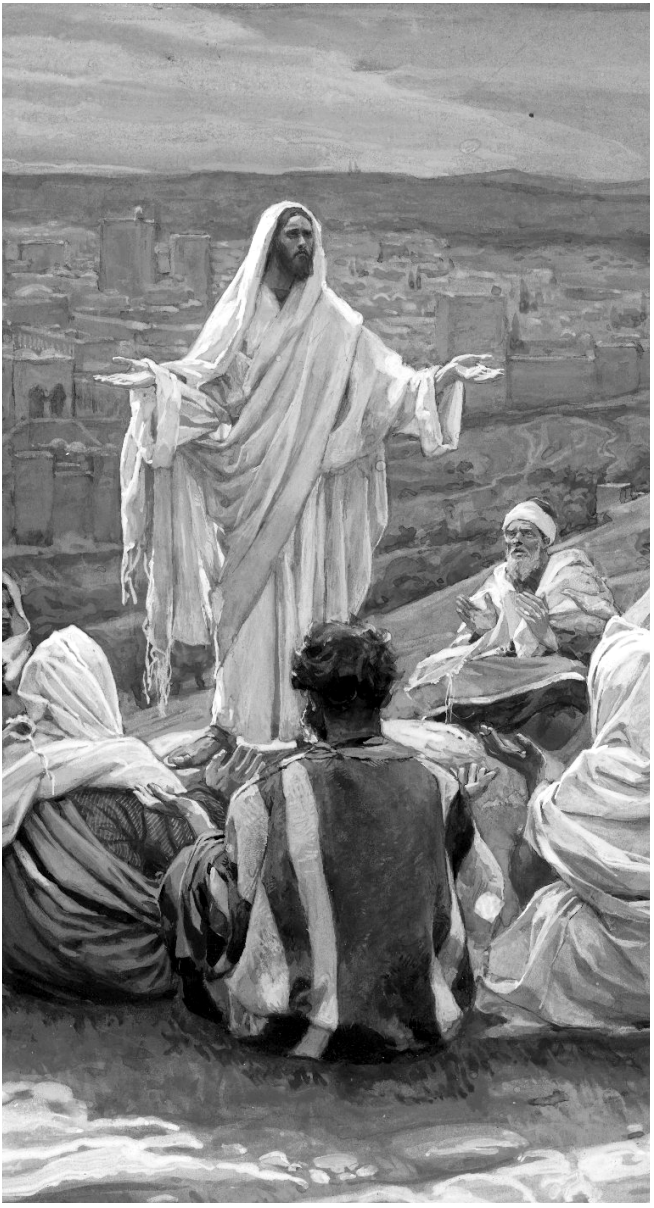
"You say I am a king. For this I was born and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth. Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice." Pilate said to him, "What is truth?"

—John 18:33–38
NABRE

NOTES

CONFERENCE

The Beatitudes: A Portrait of Christ's Kingdom



INTRODUCTION

In the meditations of this Retreat Guide we glimpsed both the purpose of the feast of Christ the King (through our reflection on the origin of the feast), and how Christ himself sees his kingship and his Kingdom (through our reflection on some of the symbolism contained in the throne that Jesus chose for himself). But what does the Kingdom of Christ look like in *our* lives? As followers of Christ, we are citizens of his Kingdom. He is our King, and so our lives are lived under his rule. But what does that look like?

THE MEANING OF DISCIPLESHIP

Jesus gave us a portrait of life in his Kingdom not only by his own example of life, but also in the very first words of his Sermon on the Mount, where he taught us the Beatitudes. As Pope Benedict XVI put it:

> The Beatitudes express the meaning of discipleship… What the Beatitudes mean cannot be expressed in purely theoretical terms; it is proclaimed in the life and suffering, and in the mysterious joy, of the disciple who gives himself over completely to following the Lord... The Beatitudes display the mystery of Christ himself, and they call us to communion with him… [T]he Beatitudes are also a road map for the Church, which recognizes in them the model of what she herself should be. They are

directions for discipleship, directions that concern every individual…[4]

The eight Beatitudes[5], in other words, are criteria for daily actions in harmony with the wisdom and grace of Christ the King. When we make choices according to the law of Christ's Kingdom, our lives resemble Christ's own life more and more closely, and that looks like what the Beatitudes describe. The Beatitudes are Christ's own marching orders for all the soldiers of his everlasting Kingdom. In living them, we make that Kingdom more fully present in our own hearts, and in the world around us. So, let's go through this portrait of a Christian disciple, point by point.[6]

BLESSED

In Matthew 5:3, Jesus gives us the first Beatitude: "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."

The word "blessed" refers to the fullness of life and meaning that comes from living in deep communion with God. The word has a long heritage throughout the Old Testament, and Jesus repeats it eight times here at the beginning of his Sermon on the Mount. Although we can't experience the complete fulfillment of all desire until we reach heaven, here on earth the growing sense of spiritual

4 Ratzinger, Joseph. Jesus of Nazareth: From the Baptism in the Jordan to the Transfiguration (Kindle Locations 1249–1251, 1259–1260, 1260–1261). The Crown Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

5 St. Luke's version presents only four, but the more complete version in the Gospel of Matthew presents eight.

6 Many theologians have commented on these few verses from St. Matthew's Gospel. In this conference, for the most part I follow the interpretation of St. Thomas Aquinas.

happiness that comes from a growing friendship with Christ is what is meant by "blessed," a word which in Latin has the same root as our English word "beatitude."

POOR IN SPIRIT

Every Beatitude has a characteristic and a result. In this first one, the characteristic is being poor in spirit, and the result is entering the kingdom of heaven.

Being poor in spirit means seeking fulfilment in our relationship with God, not in the accumulation of earthly wealth or honors. Riches and honors are not evil in themselves. In fact, they can be a source of joy and an avenue for generosity. But they cannot fill our hearts. When we act as if they can, we end up making imprudent or even immoral decisions in order to acquire them. Greed and arrogance are contrary to poverty of spirit. The poor in spirit will prefer material hardship and social rejection, if necessary, before doing anything that would damage their friendship with Christ. Every time we put God before money and success, we step forward on the path to blessedness.

The result of being poor in spirit is inheriting the kingdom of heaven. This reminds us of what Jesus says later in the Sermon on the Mount: "Seek, and you shall find." If we seek God above all things and make our daily decisions so as to build up our friendship with Christ, that friendship will grow, and his kingdom will spread in our hearts even here on earth, until it reaches its fulfillment in heaven.

THEY WHO MOURN

In the second Beatitude, Jesus tells us: "Blessed are they who mourn, for they will be comforted" (Matthew 5:4). Mourning is the experience of sorrow. By this Beatitude, we learn to moderate our pursuit of the pleasures of this world, and if necessary to forgo them altogether, in order to be faithful to Christ our King. Like money and success, pleasure can easily become an idol, something we lust after, something with which we try to fill the yearnings of our hearts. But worldly pleasures are all finite, while our hearts yearn for the infinite, for God himself. Blessed are they who mourn, because by moderating their thirst for passing worldly pleasures they teach their hearts to delight in the kingdom that will last forever—that is their comfort, now and in eternity.

MEEKNESS IS NOT WEAKNESS

The third Beatitude, "Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the land" (Matthew 5:5), teaches us to moderate what philosophers call our "irascible passions," and especially that of anger. Unchecked anger wreaks so much destruction—physical, social, and familial. But Jesus taught us that his Kingdom is not "of this world" (John 18:36), and so he never forces his way on people. When he entered Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, instead of riding a mighty stallion, like a typical warrior-king of ancient times, he rode a donkey colt. Meekness is the strength that comes with acts of patience and self-control. In the end, those who are patient and constant outlast those who are violent and forceful. And so, they will "inherit the land," they will enjoy the healthy fruits of prosperity and peace.

HUNGRY FOR RIGHTEOUSNESS

Those first three Beatitudes focus on spreading Christ's Kingdom in our own souls, so that our desires and our inclinations are all harmoniously directed towards our true good. They put order within us.

The fourth and fifth Beatitudes, on the other hand, put order in our relationships with other people. Jesus tells us: "Blessed are they who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be satisfied" (Matthew 5:6). The righteous person is the one you can count on to faithfully fulfill his duty. In biblical terms, the righteous are those who are just, those who act justly and pursue justice in all their dealings and interactions with others. When we "hunger and thirst" for this righteousness, we fulfill the duties of justice not reluctantly, but with a deep, ardent desire for the good that righteousness brings about. When we consistently choose to act in this way, we experience the sense of fulfillment that comes from being a person of integrity and authenticity. That gives us a spiritual satisfaction that no other kind of achievement can supply.

THE MERCIFUL WILL RECEIVE MERCY

In the fifth Beatitude, Jesus teaches us to go beyond the demands of duty and justice when he says, "Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy" (Matthew 5:7). Mercy "goes the extra mile," to use a phrase Jesus employs later in the Sermon on the Mount. Mercy does favors for our neighbors not because they deserve it, but simply because it's good to do so. Mercy forgives those who offend us not because they deserve to be

forgiven, but because God has shown us that his love is a merciful love, and without the fresh start that mercy gives there is no hope for anyone who lives in a fallen world. When we are attentive to the needs of others in this way, we open our hearts to receive God's grace in relation to our own needs.

POSITIVE RESULTS

The sixth and seventh Beatitudes express the *effects* of living the first five. Jesus tells us that those who are pure of heart are blessed, for they will see God (Matthew 5:8). Who are the pure of heart but those who through God's grace have cleansed from their hearts the idols of inordinate desire for money, pleasure, power, and worldly success, as shown in the first three Beatitudes? Seeking God before all these things, they shall be rewarded with a growing knowledge of him until they come to see him face to face in heaven.

Then Jesus teaches that the peacemakers are blessed, and that they will be called the children of God. In biblical language, to be a child of God is to be like God. And when we relate to others with righteousness and mercy, we order our relationships according to the same self-giving love that orders the relationships within the Blessed Trinity, and we experience the evermore abundant peace of soul that comes from living in the security of Christ's love. As St. Paul put it: "Then the peace of God that surpasses all understanding will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 4:7).

FAITHFUL UNDER FIRE

The final beatitude brings the portrait of a Christian disciple full circle, declaring that the kingdom of heaven—the reward of the first Beatitude—also belongs to those who are "persecuted for the sake of righteousness" (Matthew 5:10). To hold fast to poverty of spirit, meekness, righteousness, mercy and all the other characteristics of a citizen of Christ's Kingdom even in the face of violent opposition, social estrangement, or any other added difficulty– this is the confirmation of God's grace in our souls and our unmistakable declaration of loyalty to Christ's truth.

Poor in spirit, patient, self-controlled, just, merciful, constant amid suffering—acting in this way is how our King established his everlasting Kingdom, and it is how we who are citizens of that Kingdom continue to expand its borders and come to enjoy the purity of heart and the spiritual peace that reign there.

Much more could be said about the portrait of Christ and of every Christian that Jesus gives us in the Beatitudes, as the books in the "for further reading" section show. But for now, let's take some time to reflect prayerfully on the personnel questionnaire, which is designed to help you apply these universal theological truths to your individual situation.

PERSONAL QUESTIONNAIRE

1. When I think of "blessedness", or "happiness," what usually comes to mind? How does that harmonize with what Jesus has revealed about true blessedness?

2. [poor in spirit] What place does material wealth have in my heart? How do I behave in relation to money?

3. [poor in spirit] What place do worldly honors (awards, promotions, recognition, success) have in my heart? Have I ever found myself making moral compromises in pursuit of them? Why?

4. [mourn] How would I describe my desire for and enjoyment of material pleasures? Balanced? Healthy? Reasonable? Disproportionate? Disordered? How often do I purposely choose to moderate them or do without them, in order to maintain spiritual freedom?

5. [meek] What makes me angry and why? How do I usually respond to feelings of anger? In what situations do I try to force my will or ideas on others either through violence, intimidation, or manipulation?

6. [righteousness] Would people who know me well describe me as dependable, honest, fair, and responsible? Why or why not?

7. [righteousness] How deeply do I desire to do and promote what is right and true? How does that desire show itself in my daily life?

8. [merciful—liberality] When was the last time I went out of my way to help someone else who was in need?

9. [merciful—mercy] When was the last time I forgave someone who had offended me?

10. [pure of heart] When have I experienced God's presence most intensely? What led to that experience?

11. [peacemaker] When have I experienced interior peace most deeply and lastingly? What led to that experience?

12. How do I usually respond when doing the right thing and being faithful to my friendship with Christ stirs up opposition or ridicule? Why?

NOTES

FURTHER READING

If you feel moved to continue reflecting and praying about this theme, you may find the following books helpful:

Encyclical Letter Quas Primas
by Pope Pius XI

The Cries of Jesus from the Cross: An Anthology
by Fulton J. Sheen

Summa Theologiae I–II, question 69
by St. Thomas Aquinas

Jesus of Nazareth: From the Baptism in the Jordan to the Transfiguration
by Pope Benedict XVI

Back to Virtue
by Peter Kreeft

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