

SOLEMNITY OF JESUS CHRIST KING OF THE UNIVERSE

In the moments before Jesus succumbs to the wounds of his earthly body, a thief recognizes his kingship. Not a Pharisee, a thief. A thief who is seemingly not worthy of the wonderful gift that he will soon receive. How was he suddenly worthy? What influences him to come to such a conclusion, that he is crucified next to the savior of the world? In many ways the thief's conversion is no different than many of our experience with Christ. We cannot see the importance of faith until we are presented with no other option.

Sadly, in a Pew research study it was found that not even people who deem themselves highly religious use the Church's teachings as a guide to making important decisions in their life.

About three-quarters of U.S. Catholics (73%) say they look to their own conscience "a great deal" for guidance on difficult moral questions. Far fewer Catholics say they rely a great deal on the Catholic Church's teachings (21%), the Bible (15%) or the pope (11%) for such guidance.

Catholics who are highly religious are more likely than less religious Catholics to turn to church teachings, the Bible or the pope for guidance on difficult moral questions. Still, far fewer highly religious Catholics say they rely a great deal on any of these three sources for guidance on tough moral questions than say they rely on their own conscience.

And in an even more troubling finding, among Christians, believing in God tops the list, with 86% saying belief in God is "essential" to their Christian identity.

We are required by the Church to follow our conscience, so that is a positive in the findings, but if only 86% of Christians state that a belief in God is a crucial part of their religious belief, there appears to be serious work to do in these areas. These studies have their purpose, when reading the results and responses there appears to be a level of indifference that is concerning.

Unfortunately, many of us have taken the example of the thief, rather than that of Christ to be our guiding principles. The world we live in is a constant bombardment of information filled with reminders of the ever-increasing opportunity for instant gratification. Whether it be shopping for Christmas presents, or house hold items we use daily, many of us are not willing to wait longer than the Amazon prime delivery date to receive anything. Yes, it is convenient, yes, I order items from time to time, but for many this is the primary way of receiving goods. What is the harm? Well at first glance not much, but if we transition from a community to individual stops for the delivery driver, we quickly become a society of isolated individuals.

Another part of the aforementioned study is that only 35% of Christians deem it necessary to attend services weekly. I cant help but think that those numbers are not going to improve unless folks realize that it is not our decision to make whether to attend mass or go to a ballgame. Christ is present with us everywhere, but we especially find ourselves in his presence at mass, in the Eucharist. The way we worship at mass teaches us our faith, forms us in faith and enables us to live that faith. Most of us have come to mass when we really wanted to be somewhere else. We may have even been distracted while attending the liturgy. The mere act of going and participating is crucial in maintaining a relationship with Christ. Many of us have been to a meeting thinking, this could have been an email. After the meeting was

over, you realize that you received a crucial piece of information, or a new contact. This is one of the reasons we do our best to be here, with Christ, at his church.

There is a Latin expression, *ex opere operato*, which translates to by the action being done it is done. For instance, we may have one or two teenagers in the Confirmation class who are not necessarily there because they want to be. The kids will complete their formation, pass their test, do their service hours and be confirmed by the Bishop in the spring. If they were to be completely honest, would they say that they know why they are receiving this Sacrament, probably not. But they will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit in the Sacrament of Confirmation. By the action being done, it is done.

Sometimes the fruits of these sacraments do not become apparent until much later, as with these candidates we may not have understood what was being asked of us at confirmation. Most of us tucked those graces away in our spiritual wallets not to be seen for quite a while, but they will bear fruit. They are there, that is the crucial part. The thief may or may not have had the opportunity to be in the presence of Christ prior to the unfortunate situation he found himself in in the Gospel reading. We can probably say with a great certainty that there were many more people present that day to witness the events that were unfolding. But even when questioned by this thief, Christ did not affirm his belief with a firm yes, I am the King of Kings, he assures him that his faith has saved him in saying that “today you will join me in paradise”.

The “good” thief came to this conclusion by faith. There may certainly be more than a hint of desperation, but he still had the realization that he was in the presence of Christ, the true king. We may not be crucified on Golgotha, but many still move about in the same state of despair. But unlike the thief, we have an opportunity to appreciate the sacrifice made on our behalf and move closer to being the people we were created to be.

As humanity goes further and further along its path, we find ourselves bogged down in trying to explain what we truly have no words to explain. Theologians have spent centuries developing theories on this mystery or that. They come up with big words to explain these events and occurrences, but they still remain just as mysterious. What we can do is believe in the words of Jesus himself. Christ says plainly, this is my body, this is my blood. Christ established his church in Peter, giving him the power to govern, establishing his church on earth. We do not need to go any farther than the words Jesus himself. If we approach Christ in sincere faith, recognizing the gifts that Paul reminds us of in his letter to the Colossians, we can achieve all that is promised.

Popular trends come and go, there are times of famine and there are times of plenty, but the one constant is Christ. Throughout history even the Church has suffered greatly from the faults of man, but the Church remains because of Christ. We have a tendency to try to control what we were not meant to control, and to understand what is meant to be a mystery, in doing this we only limit ourselves in our ability to achieve what is meant for us, eternal salvation. A closer relationship with Christ is not found in understanding how something may have happened. Instead of focusing on what we don't know, we should try focusing on what we do know, in doing so we can achieve a newfound peace in the hope of eternal life with the true King of the Universe, Jesus Christ.