

# The Hidden King

By [Fr. Paul D. Scalia](#) SUNDAY, NOVEMBER 22, 2020

There is a certain irony in today's Solemnity of Christ the King. An irony that touches on the subtlety of His Kingship and the purpose of it.

In short, we celebrate today the very title that our Lord Himself avoided. When the crowds went to make Him King, He withdrew from them. (Jn 6:15) When Pontius Pilate asked Him directly, He gave the elusive response, "You say that I am a king;" (Jn 18:37. Although today we proclaim Him King of the universe, in His earthly life He desired to conceal His Kingship, to be merely "the Son of Man."

Now, the story of a hidden king has always delighted us. There is something in the tale of an obscure, humble man whose veins run with royal blood that inspires and gives hope. We see this figure perhaps first in King David, who is the least in his family and yet divinely chosen, anointed, and elevated to the throne of Israel. There is Arthur, the unknown king who alone can draw the sword from the stone. Tolkien's Aragorn hides his royal lineage until the time for him to reclaim the crown of Gondor. And so on.

But these are just faint hints and echoes of the real hidden King. Jesus comes into the world possessing all might but wielding none of it. At His birth, His own people fail to recognize His Kingship; magi from the east have to bring the news. Even when Jesus begins His public life, the Baptist announces Him cryptically as "one among you whom you do not recognize." (Jn 1:26)

Unlike the others, however, this King's humble state is not a fiction or a setback. He truly becomes one with us, His subjects – sharing our humble joys and deep sorrows, being like us in all things but sin. He veils His divine authority under our frail humanity as both King and kin.



Even more, our Lord continues this veiled presence among us. He comes to us in what Mother Teresa called the “distressing disguise of the poor.” As we hear in today’s Gospel, “Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me.” (Mt 25:40) (Here, unfortunately, the Catholic lectionary fails us. It robs this verse of its significance by rendering “You did it *to* me” as merely “You did *for* me.” As if our Lord were asserting a mere moral unity.)

By the poverty of the Incarnation, the Son of God united himself particularly with the poor. “Our Lord Jesus Christ...though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor” (2 Cor 8:9). Thus He can say without qualification, “You did it to me” – by which He intends not a moral unity only but a personal identification with the poor. In them the King continues His hidden presence among us.

And not only in them. Our Lord identifies Himself with another group. “Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me; and whoever receives me, receives not me but him who sent me.” (Mk 11:37) We have here the same sober and unqualified identification of the King with someone among us. Again, He comes to us in a hidden manner, this time as a child. What inspiration these words must bring to those who generously welcome children. And what dread they ought to bring a culture that rejects children, even killing them in the womb.

Our Lord conceals His Kingship not to mislead us but to purify our understanding of it. He withdrew from the crowds because they would not have understood His Kingship. He responded enigmatically to Pilate because that ruler had no ability to grasp the truth. They first needed to learn that what they thought made for kingship didn’t. Christ the King comes in a hidden manner to purify our worldly ideas, to cleanse our minds of earthbound concepts of rule, authority, and power.

In addition to this purification, the hidden King teaches us the truth. In effect, the disguises of the King do not so much conceal as reveal. By coming to us in weakness, in the poor and vulnerable, He teaches us about the Kingdom and true Kingship. From Him we learn that to serve is to reign; that authority is ordered toward service; that power is ordered toward mercy; and that truth triumphs over might.

Which brings us to the purpose of this feast. Far from being a relic of the ancient or medieval Church, this feast was only established in 1925 – just as monarchies were disappearing and, more

importantly, as Christian thought was being driven from society. As atheistic governments arose throughout the world, they rejected any limits to their power. Pius XI, who spent most of his pontificate dealing with these hostile governments, intended this feast as a vindication of Christ the King's rights in the public square. It was to be a check on those who would sever governance from truth and thus run roughshod over the weak.

Today's Gospel presents the King's coming at the end of the world. But His words – *You did it to me* – indicate that He is already here. He is indeed present now – not in the powerful and wealthy but in the weak and vulnerable, in all exposed to the wielding of power without justice and might without truth.

**\*Image:** *Head of Christ Crowned with Thorns* by Lucas Cranach the Elder, c. 1510 [private collection]

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