

## Comment

At the end of the Holy Year in 1925 Pope Pius XI instituted for October the feast of Christ the King which (in a very different form and rather later) we still celebrate every year. Since we already had a perfectly good feast of the messianic kingship of Christ in the Ascension, it is clear that the reason for the new celebration was not to be sought in the purely theological and liturgical area. It was not, of course, far to seek: Abbot Schuster in his authoritative *Sacramentary* explained that "In spite of the solemn affirmations of the kingship of Christ contained in scripture . . . for more than fifty years a pernicious heresy has spread throughout the civilised world which some call liberalism and others laicism. This error . . . consists chiefly in the denial of the supremacy of God and the Church over Society and the State." It would be only slightly unkind to say that the feast existed until 1971 in order to perpetuate both these last confusions: between God and the Church and between Society and the State, confusions especially damaging in that the Church was identified with the clergy, particularly the Pope, while the State meant simply the ruling class. Schuster tells us that in consequence of such liberalism the State will "claim divine prerogatives requiring like Moloch of old the sacrifice of every other right both of the individual and the family. The State is the supreme expression of the absolute."

You have to remember that Schuster was writing from Rome in the late twenties and thus, for him as for Pius XI himself, the feast was essentially an anti-fascist demonstration. Their opposition to fascism, however, took the form of ecclesiastical triumphalism. Mussolini was to be brought to heel not by free trades unions or any power of the organised working class, he was to be confronted with the power of the papacy and militant Catholic Action under the direction of the clergy. It should be remembered that, although in the end unsuccessful, this force had in many places both more teeth and more guts than the labour movement. It is, happily I suppose, difficult to recapture the extraordinary spirit of those days—when, for example, a Pope could calmly insert an entire papal decree into the Divine Office (making the longest and most turgid Second Nocturne reading ever)—but unhappily it is not so difficult to find something like the same spirit re-emerging today in subtler forms.

The feast of Christ the King was, amongst other things, intended to mobilise the Catholic world behind the Pope's defense of Catholic institutions, particularly schools and youth movements against the encroachments of the fascists, and in the heat of the struggle the question of Catholic education, which is not quite the same thing, became somewhat obscured. It is a matter of some importance that the Synod of Bishops currently meeting in Rome to discuss catechetics should not make the same mistake. The rec-

ent statement from the Congregation for Catholic Education (*The Catholic School* Rome, March 1977) is not, in this respect very promising.

Pius XI was perfectly clear that the kingship of Christ is 'not of this world'; the rule of Christ (which merged imperceptibly into the power of the Pope) was not going to try to disturb the power structures of this capitalist world—*non eripit mortalia qui regna dat caelestia*—the princes of this world were to remain unchallenged on their thrones, but within these structures the clergy demanded a piece of the power. Schuster reminds us that "the supremacy of the Catholic Church and the Pope over nations and their monarchs . . . formed part of the international law (*sic*) of Christian states in the Middle Ages," and, referring to the text "His power is an eternal power . . .", says: "It is easy to recognise the partial fulfilment of this prophecy . . . if we compare the history of the Church . . . with that of other empires and dynasties."

This is the ethos that has made "Christ the King" a slogan for the bootboys who provide the street muscle of Lefebvre and his 'tridentinists' and for the rest of the bullies of extreme right-wing Catholicism. All such triumphalist implications have been explicitly rejected by Vatican II, and perhaps more significant than any of the conciliar documents themselves is the new liturgy for Christ the King. Pius XI has disappeared to be replaced by, of all people, Origen and (though like the previous Office it can't quite get around to using I Cor. 15:24 and 28) the profile is notably lower and that much more effective.

The fathers of Vatican II do not, however, form the only or even the predominant influence in the post-conciliar Church. As Pope Paul approaches the end of his rule the most urgent question facing the Church is how she will interpret the kingship of Christ and her part in it. She could see herself primarily as the Church of the poor in solidarity with the oppressed and exploited, remembering that *regnavit a ligno Deus*. If so, she will find her centre in the world where the gospel is being most insistently and effectively preached and where, in consequence, she is most strongly under attack, in those countries where she challenges the right-wing military regimes set up by capitalism in decline. Or alternatively, she could follow what we can probably call the Benelli line and consolidate her power amongst the little group of very wealthy countries that, in defiance of history and geography, is absurdly called 'Europe'. Of course the Church cannot, in the end, be identified either with the anti-communism of the EEC or with the liberation movement of the third world, but where she places her primary emphasis and primary concern is going to determine crucially how effective the preaching of the gospel will be for another generation.

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