

Several of our members participated in the National Catholic Youth Conference this week. Over 21,000 people from across the nation jammed downtown Kansas City, bringing a spirit of prayer and enthusiasm to our diocese. I heard confessions there for an hour on Friday, and it's always very moving to be with young people coming to know their identity: who they are, who God made them to be, and how they should live as a result. Sometimes people drift away from the Church or from Christ, and they aren't quite sure how they got there. The journey back is always filled with a deeper awareness of themselves.

This search for identity appears several times in today's gospel. Pilate is concerned about who Jesus is: Is he a king? Jesus simply says, "my kingdom is not here." That's good enough for Pilate; to his ears, Jesus has just identified himself as a king in competition for authority. But Jesus turns the tables on his accuser. Now Pilate has to think about his identity. Jesus asks him, "Do you say this on your own or have others told you about me?" In other words, are you a disciple? Pilate shifts the argument to the identity of the crowd. How could Pilate be a disciple when Jesus' own nation and chief priests handed him over? He assumes Jesus cannot be much of a leader if his followers have turned against him. So, this brief encounter raises all these questions about identity: Who is the crowd? Are they enemies or disciples? Who is Pilate? Is he in charge or is he on trial? Who is Jesus? Is he a failure or a king?

At the climax of Jesus' life, none of this was clear to the people who knew him. We should not be too surprised if we sometimes struggle with similar questions in the normal course of life. Looking at the people around us, we may wonder what they believe and if we belong. Looking at Jesus we may wonder is he my Lord, or is he sometimes just too inconvenient? And looking inside we may wonder just who are we? Are we good disciples of Jesus? Or have we drifted away?

Today our church celebrates the solemnity of Christ the King. This feast comes at the end of the church year, the last Sunday in Ordinary Time. It concludes a year in which we anticipated and celebrated the birth of Christ last winter, commemorated his death and resurrection last spring, and meditated slowly on his life, miracles and teachings in the other weeks of the year. As this liturgical year draws to a close, we hear once more about Jesus just before his death – arrested, on trial, spurned by his disciples, and taunted by civil authorities. To the untrained eye, he looks like a failure, but throughout this year we have learned more: He is our teacher, our model, our God and our King.

In Kansas City this week, thousands of young Catholics came to the same realization, and they are making within their hearts a throne fit for a king. This weekend the Church invites us to renew our pledge to do the same thing. We will if these identities have become clear: The Church is a community of disciples; we are each a member; and Jesus Christ is our king.