

### “The Choice That Counts”

The Hurricane Katrina reminds us once again that there are forces of nature that are beyond our control. Winds of 145 miles per hour. A storm that covered the entire Gulf of Mexico. Up through Mississippi and Louisiana and Alabama the storm raged, and all people could do was try to get out of its way.

There are not only forces in nature, there are also forces in society that you and I have no control over. Consider the financial situation in this country today. I know that some of our people, whose judgments I highly respect, are not worried about our financial situation, but I am. Any time our country is borrowing almost two billion dollars a day – and most of it from foreign countries – I am worried. But you and I have no more choice about the financial course of this country than we do about the course of Hurricane Katrina. In each case, about the best we can do is try to get out of the way.

There are some forces in life whose course we have no choice about, but our Lord reminds us that we are not helpless. We do have a choice, and that is the choice that counts. Our Lord says: “But seek ye first his kingdom, and his righteousness; and all these things” – food and clothing – “shall be added unto you”. “But seek ye first his kingdom and his righteousness”, that is the choice that we have. And that is the choice that counts.

In the time of St. Paul, the Roman Emperor Nero ruled with an iron hand. The Roman historian Suetonius in his book *The Twelve Caesars* says that Nero was the worst Caesar of them all. His persecutions of the Christians were severe. It is said that at one of Nero’s dinner parties, he had Christians tied to stakes, covered with tar, and ignited, to provide lighting for the dinner! Nero was a tyrant of the most powerful empire the world had ever known, but Nero’s days ended with him hiding in a slimy cellar, in fear of his own troops. A rebel army was marching on Rome, Nero had waked in the night in a fright, only to discover that his servants had deserted, and he was all alone in his palace. In a panic he ran and crawled through bushes to the home of one of his servants, and in the cellar as the rebels approached, he took his own life. But the Church Nero persecuted continued to grow and develop. In the saying attributed to Tertullian, “The blood of the martyrs was the seed of the Church”. Seek ye first the kingdom of God, that is the choice; and the kingdom of God prevails.

St. Augustine witnessed the Fall of Rome, when Alaric sacked the city in 410. Augustine was the bishop of Hippo, in what is now Tunis; and through the refugees from Rome he had a clear picture of what was happening. Augustine saw the Fall of Rome, but he also saw the City of God. Augustine maintained that from the time of Adam’s Fall in the Garden of Eden, there have been two cities on earth: the city of man, Babylon, and the City of God. The city of man rises and falls,

but the City of God is eternal. As the Psalmist says: “Thy kingdom is an everlasting kingdom, and thy dominion endureth throughout all generations. (Ps. 145:13) And it was Augustine’s view, in his book, *The City of God*, that did much to guide the Christian Church through the Dark Ages that followed the Fall of Rome. Seek ye first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, that is the choice we have, and that is the choice that counts.

Sometimes, with all the forces we see shaping life around us, we may wonder whether choosing the kingdom of God is still the choice that counts. Sometimes it is easy to doubt. The Frenchman Voltaire made a career of attacking Christianity. He was sure that the Church was dead. And his famous wish was that he could hang the last king with the entrails of the last bishop! But as his life came to a close, Voltaire changed his mind, and on his deathbed asked to be baptized in the Faith he had spent a lifetime in deriding. (And he was baptized, by a Jesuit named Gautier!)

Seek ye first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and in the kingdom all these other things – food and clothing, the necessities of life – will be provided. In 410 the city of Rome fell, and the Dark Ages began, when Rome could no longer protect the borders of the country from invasion. The Dark Ages began to recede, in the 700s when Charles Martel turned back the Muslims when they were within 50 miles of Paris; and then his grandson Charlemagne spent a lifetime protecting the boundaries of Christendom on the continent. With the borders secure, agriculture and trade and commerce and education could develop. History records that in times of famine, Charlemagne himself visited the monasteries of his kingdom to see that the poor and hungry were provided for by the storehouses of the monasteries. Seek ye first the kingdom, and all these other things will be added unto you.

And how do we seek the kingdom? We seek the kingdom, first, by seeking the King! We seek His pardon for our sins. We seek His direction for our lives. We seek His strength to do His will.

And as we seek the King, we find that He is already seeking us. As St. Paul said, “But God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us”. (Romans 5:8) Already He is seeking us, to make us part of His eternal kingdom. And here in this service He offers us His life – His Body and His Blood – to be received spiritually. He offers us His life. Seek ye the kingdom by receiving the King. This is the choice that counts.

A Sermon at All Saints Church, Pensacola, Florida, on Sunday, September 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2005, by  
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