

Solemnity of the Epiphany

Go and search diligently for the child.

January 6-7, 2018/ Cathedral of Saint Paul

Readings: Isaiah 60: 1-6; Ephesians 3:2-3,5-6; Matthew 2:1-12

There is a magnificent Mosaic of the Three Magi, popularly known as the Three Kings, in the Church of Sant'Apollinare Nuovo in Ravenna, Italy depicting the Feast of the Epiphany. The basilica was built by the Ostrogothic King Theodoric sometime after 500 A.D. as an Arian Cathedral dedicated to Christ. After the final defeat of the Arian heresy, it was converted into a Catholic church dedicated to St. Martin, a fierce opponent of Arianism.¹

It is unusual at first glance, mostly because the figures are neither on bended knee, nor in a position of prostration. No, they are *leaning*, and doing so in unison in a line one next to the other. Each of the kings is dressed differently as Persians in magnificently colored leopard-print pants, capes and Phrygian caps, gazing upward at a star, bearing gifts.²

They appear almost to be falling over, carrying their gifts, with two angels positioned between them and the Child Jesus seated on his mother's lap, not in a manger. Their names are listed above them– Balthasar, Melchior and Gaspar. This is likely the very first depiction of the Magi with their names in all of Christian art.³

In this most ancient feast dating to the 3rd century, our attention is drawn to the divine dignity of the Christ Child, the Messianic King of the world, before whom even kings fall prostrate. The universality of God's salvation in the New Jerusalem, which is the Church, finds expression in our second reading, in which Saint Paul proclaims: "the Gentiles are coheirs, members of the same body, and co-partners in the promise in Christ Jesus through the Gospel."

¹ It was renamed again in the 9th c. when the relics of St. Apollinaris found a permanent home.

² Description by M. Ford Creech Antiques and Fine Arts. Mosaic c

³ The names derive from an early 6th Century Greek manuscript, including a description of a mosaic of the magi, possibly this very one at Ravenna.

The figures of the Kings intrigued me, mostly because they so clearly stood out amidst a plethora of human figures, all looking so much alike. And they were leading the procession, almost beckoning us to follow in line. This feast is an integral part of the Christmas cycle.

God has been made manifest in the person of the Word made flesh, and it has now fallen to us to continue to make his name known and loved in the world. The guidance of the star is now replaced by guidance from the Holy Spirit, alive and active in the Church. Thus, the Church too, carries out the mission of the star for humanity. We, like the figures on the wall in Ravenna, yearn to reach out and touch our Lord and Savior. We do not want anyone to impede our travels to Him, but too often it is not others, but our own sin that prevents us from approaching in confidence.

Too often, we stand at a comfortable distance, lurking around the corner, hesitant, yet still nearby. The Solemnity of the Epiphany calls us forward, beckons us to get in line, saint and sinner alike. Yes, we must wait our turn in procession, but He will remain waiting for us. He will never tell us that it is too late.

This too is the challenge for each believer, each Christian. We must illumine the path for others to see the light of Truth; we must invite them to get in line. Nowhere in the Scriptures are we called to hoard the gift of faith for ourselves. This is a feast of Mission and evangelization for all who are co-partners in the promise of Jesus.

They exist there and in other places in the world so that the name of Jesus may be made manifest, for it is by the name of Jesus that all men are saved. Let each of us do our own part to honor and revere His name.

Christ is manifest in our midst for all to see; this royal action of Christ reaches out to all his people, joyfully subject to his Reign of Peace. We gain strength when we come together in spirit and truth to worship God. He has given to us the greatest gift in the person of His Son, now poured

forth by means of his sacrificial death, and made present in His Body and Blood given to us. Let us do our part to prostrate ourselves and offer our own gifts to the Newborn King.