

Solemnity of the Epiphany

Go and search diligently for the child.

January 2, 2022/ Cathedral of Saint Paul

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

There is a magnificent fresco in Cell 39 of the convent of San Marco in Florence. Painted by Blessed Fra Angelico, it depicts the Adoration of the Magi on the Feast of the Epiphany. It is different from many others with the same subject. Here, the first King to arrive is in the prostrated position, crown removed and reaching to kiss the feet of the Jesus, who is being held on the lap of his mother Mary. Many artistic works show them in procession, or on bended knee, but few in full prostration.

Few accounts in the Gospels are as awe inspiring, magnificent or captivating as this Feast. Traveling by means of a star, three mysterious men from the East come upon the Savior of the world. Bearing gifts, they worship in humility. They were likely Persian religious leaders, and not only followed the star, but were guided by Sacred Scriptures. In particular, they were familiar with the prophecy of Micah according to which the Messiah would be born at Bethlehem, the city of David, situated about six miles south of Jerusalem (cf. Mi 5:1).

The star stopped over Bethlehem, its function and purpose fulfilled. It served no other purpose. A star cannot elicit faith; that is only a gift of God's grace. The star could point to the place, but the gift of faith is what led the Magi to prostrate themselves. Today, what will take the place of the star in our lives? Whom will we follow to find the Christ Child?

In this most ancient feast originating at the dawn of 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, where Saint Paul proclaims: "the Gentiles are coheirs, members of the same body, and co-partners in the promise in Christ Jesus through the Gospel."

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 in the Church. The Church too, therefore, carries out the mission of the star for humanity.

But so too is the challenge for each believer, each Christian. We must all illumine the path for others to see the light of Truth. Nowhere in the Scriptures are we called to hoard the gift of faith for ourselves. Today's feast is one of evangelization for all who are co-partners in the promise of Jesus. Let me give just one example.

When I was in the sixth grade, as the Vietnam War ended, our parish adopted a family from Cambodia, providing housing and supplies to help them start a new life. My own mother volunteered to help teach the mother English. Her first lesson was to write 1975 on a piece of paper. She pointed to the Crucifix in their family home and gestured- "When he was a (rocking motion) baby, it was the year 1. Now, it is 1975." She nodded and understood.

In Cambodia, a tiny flock of about 19,000 Catholics live in a nation of nearly 17 million people. Christianity came to Cambodia by Portuguese missionaries in the 16th century. Sources put the Catholic proportion at a mere 0.2 % of the general population and there are only 10 native-Cambodian priests in the entire country.

I remember the news reports about the horrors of the 1975-79 reign of the Khmer Rouge, the name given to the Communist Party. Minority group, especially Christians, were particularly targeted and brutally so, as depicted in the 1984 film "The Killing Fields." It took 20 years after the Khmer Rouge before a Catholic priest was ordained in 1995.¹

¹ Catholicism in Cambodia in Catholic World Report, March 17, 2021. [See link here.](#)

And though, not established enough to even have a single diocese, the Catholic Church exists there, so that the name of Jesus may be made manifest, for it is by the name of Jesus that all people are saved. Jesus came to redeem all mankind, and the sign of wise men from the East left no shadow of a doubt that he came to lead even the pagans to salvation.

The Church must be present even in the tiniest corners of the world, even where She is a minority- even to the ends of the earth. Let us do our part to prostrate ourselves and offer our own gifts to the Newborn King.