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by Bishop David M. O'Connell, C.M.
Diocese of Trenton, NJ, USA

REFLECTIONS ON THE FEAST OF THE EPIPHANY OF THE LORD



For much of contemporary secular society, Christmas is over for another year. For Catholics and Christians, however, there is “still more to come.” This weekend, [January 2-3], the Roman Catholic Church anticipates the Christmas feast of the “Epiphany of the Lord,” traditionally celebrated throughout the Western Christian world on January 6. Known by many other names in a number of different cultures – “Little Christmas,” “Three Kings’ Day,” the “Twelfth Day of Christmas,” “Twelfth Night,” etc. – this feast extends the Christmas season by commemorating the visit of the “magi” or “wise men” to the Christ Child. What is the Feast of the Epiphany all about in the Church?

Most of us are familiar with the legendary presence of the “three kings” from manger scenes in our churches and homes. We can sing the words of the popular hymn “We Three Kings” from memory. We know the gifts they brought as they followed the Christmas star to the place of the Nativity: gold, frankincense and myrrh.

The story of the “three wise men” or “magi” is derived from the Gospel of Matthew, chapter 2, where the sacred author describes their visit to King Herod in Jerusalem in search of the “newborn king of the Jews.” They told him they “saw his star at its rising” and – recalling the words of the prophet Micah that the “one to rule Israel” would come from Bethlehem (Micah 5:2) – they wanted to pay him homage.

“Troubled” by this news of competition, King Herod dispatched them to Bethlehem and directed them to return to him once they found him there. And so, following the star, they entered “the house and saw the child with Mary his mother” and presented their gifts. They had a dream, however, not to return to King Herod and, so, they journeyed home via another route.

That's the story. It is only found in the Gospel of Matthew, nowhere else in the scriptures. In the early centuries of the Church's developing tradition, the visit of the three magi had a great impact on its imagination and became part of the whole liturgical re-presentation of Christ's birth, his early life, his baptism by John in the Jordan and his first public miracle at the wedding Feast of Cana. Eventually, the Epiphany became a separate liturgical celebration as did the commemoration of the Baptism of the Lord.

Let's focus on the celebration of the Epiphany as we Catholics have come to know it.

First, the "magi." They are also called "wise men," "kings," and "astrologers." It is this last identification would explain their interest in and attraction to the "star." The term itself comes from ancient Greek and Arabic expressions used in many ways but, basically, to describe men of great learning – hence "wise" men. Although not Jews themselves, they would be familiar with many ancient religious traditions and customs. This would explain their knowledge of the prophecies of Micah, which they quoted to King Herod. Matthew notes that they came "from the east."

Scripture does not claim that they were "three" in number nor does it identify them as "Caspar, Melchior and Balthasar" as later tradition customarily names them. The presumption that there were "three" of them comes from the three gifts Matthew says they offered to the child and his Mother: gold, representing royalty – Micah predicts he will "rule Israel;" frankincense, used in ancient worship rites – the magi "prostrated themselves and did him homage;" and myrrh, a perfume used at the coronation of kings or to anoint the dead – perhaps a prediction of the eventual death of the king.

Next, the star. Whether or not the star was a miraculous or unusual apparition is not clear from the story itself. It is entirely possible that the star was clearer in the sky at the time of the journey of the magi "from the east." It cannot be dismissed or discounted but it certainly was interpreted at the time to have a special prominence or significance. It does add to an amazing story.

In his book "Jesus of Nazareth: The Infancy Narratives," Pope Benedict XVI

observed that it was not the star that determined the child's destiny but the child who directed the star.

Finally, the story itself. "Epiphany" comes from a Greek linguistic expression that is translated as "display" or "manifestation." In Matthew's account, the visit of the magi is intended to demonstrate or "manifest" that Jesus, the child of Mary born in Bethlehem, is the long-awaited Messiah of Israel, predicted by the prophets of old. They called upon King Herod during their journey as a courtesy because they presumed that he, too, shared their enthusiasm for the anticipated birth of "a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel."

The Catechism of the Catholic Church observes that "The Epiphany is the manifestation of Jesus as Messiah of Israel, Son of God and Savior of the world" and that the magi's coming to Jerusalem, in order to pay homage to the king of the Jews, shows that they seek in Israel, in the messianic light of the star of David, the one who will be the king of the nations (Catechism, 528)."

For Catholics and Christians, Christmas does not end with the celebrations of December 25 or January 1 or even January 6. No, Christmas begins on the great feast of Christ's birth and continues with the visit of the magi to Bethlehem, with the baptism of Jesus in the Jordan River and with the Wedding Feast of Cana when his miraculous power is first publicly revealed.

The Lord Jesus Christ, born of Mary, adored by the magi, is the Messiah, the Son of God and Savior of the World. Let the celebration continue! With the magi this Sunday of the Epiphany, "come let us adore him, Christ the Lord!"