

# Epiphany

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Wisdom is a difficult thing, so the Feast of the Magi, the Wise men, is a difficult feast; journeys are difficult things; often pilgrims must pass through dry lands, enduring hunger and thirst. The journey of the Magi, however, anticipates the pilgrimage that is our life in this world and arrives at the supreme goal, the feet of the Son of God made man.

It is not enough simply to arrive at the feet of the Son of God, we must arrive there and *do him homage*; we must worship him, in spirit and in truth. (cf. Jn 4:24) That is what the Magi did: on seeing the child with Mary his Mother, *they prostrated themselves and did him homage. Then they opened their treasures and offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.*

By the gift of gold, the Magi acknowledged the child as a king to whom they were subject; by the gift of frankincense, they acknowledged the Son of God, whom they worshipped; by the gift of myrrh, they gave thanks because he was destined to give his life upon the Cross for our salvation.

On the Mass of Christmas day, in the prayer over the offerings, we acknowledged that when he was born of the Virgin Mary, Jesus Christ 'inaugurated the fullness of divine worship'. To worship or adore God means to give our life back, in an act of thanksgiving (which is the meaning of the word '*eucharist*') to the One who gave it to us in the first place. Yet, our own lives, by themselves, are pretty worthless in relation to God, even without taking sin into consideration. By becoming man, born of the Virgin Mary, Jesus inaugurates 'the fullness of divine worship' by giving us himself, God and man, to offer back to God in an act of worship.

That is why the Church, in this Mass of the Epiphany, in the prayer over the offerings asks the Lord to look with favor on the gifts of his Church "in which are offered now not gold or frankincense or myrrh, but he who by them is proclaimed, sacrificed and received, Jesus Christ."

Now, the principal way in which we, as the Church, commemorate, celebrate, and honor the mysteries of the life of Jesus Christ is through the celebration of the Mass. Each one of those mysteries reveals something about the Mass itself, while the Mass takes up and makes each of the mysteries of Christ's life present in our own life. The pilgrimage of our whole life is summed up, in a way, in each day and in each week, when the pilgrimage of our daily life anticipates the goal of our whole life in the offering of the sacrifice and in the communion received.

Once again, by becoming man, born of the Virgin Mary, Jesus Christ inaugurated the fullness of divine worship. He made it possible for us to give God perfect worship in accordance with our own nature. So we do not just worship the invisible God through invisible interior acts in our hearts, but we worship God made visible – that is really the meaning of the word ‘epiphany’: the visible manifestation of God – in our own nature. Nor do we just offer to God, our interior acts, but we offer him the very Body and Blood of his Son Jesus Christ. Nor do we worship God, each one alone in his heart, but we worship God together, as part of his people, as part of his Body, the Church.

Now objectively Jesus Christ, in his Body and Blood is placed on the altar and offered at Mass, whether we are part of it or not. Nevertheless, St. Augustine tells us that God should be worshipped in faith, hope, and love. (Enchiridion I.3) That is because we actively participate in the offering of the Mass, we become part of it, through our interior acts of the theological virtues of faith, hope, and charity or love. Faith, hope, and charity reorder our lives directing us towards God in a very concrete way through Jesus Christ. Faith, hope, and charity turn our life into a pilgrimage, like the journey of the Magi, with God as our destination.

Properly speaking these theological virtues set us into a direct relationship to God himself. Through faith we open our minds – this is the truly ‘open mind’ - to receive the revelation of the One who can neither deceive nor be deceived; through hope we desire the true good, the supreme goal of life, that he has promised us and rely on his help to attain it; through love we long to be united to him and are already united to him by the union of our will with his.

The Magi put these virtues into practice in their journey to Bethlehem. By faith they believed in the promises of God recorded in the prophets; by hope they set out on the journey to encounter Christ the King; in love they prostrated themselves in homage before him.

We exercise these virtues in a concrete and practical way in the Mass when by the gold of faith we recognize the truth of Christ’s Body and Blood upon the altar; by the frankincense of hope, we offer our prayers, desiring that we might receive the fulfillment of his promise of eternal life; and by the myrrh of love we immolate our own self-will in union with his death on the Cross.

Alas, I fear that in this day and age hardly anyone really cares about such matters. It seems that the typical response is, “So what?” When faced with questions about divine worship, people are likely to say that what really matters is how we treat each other as human beings.

Some 50 years ago, at the Second Vatican Council, precisely in a document on the role of the Church in the Modern World, the Church answered this very question with the affirmation, “The truth is that only in the mystery of the incarnate Word does the mystery of man take on light.” (GS 22)

Those who affirm that what really matters is how we treat each other as human beings beg the question; they take for granted that everyone knows and agrees on what it is to be a human being. That is *one giant assumption!* Indeed, I would dare say that it is quite evident that just as people disagree on the reality of God and divine worship, they also disagree on what it is to be human and how we should treat one another as human beings.

It is only in the mystery of the Incarnate Word of God, Jesus Christ, that we truly discover fully our own identity, dignity, and destiny. Only then are we able to recognize that same identity, dignity, and destiny in our brothers and sisters.

Only when we follow the Magi on their journey of faith, hope, and love and so come to recognize, in the mystery of true worship, the identity of the Child in the arms of the Virgin Mary, do we discover our own dignity and destiny. Only when we receive the light that comes to us from God, through Jesus Christ, will that light shine forth so as to give light to all the nations and peoples of the earth.