

THE EPIPHANY

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HE adoration by the Magi, usually portrayed at the Crib, is an event to which the Church attaches a great importance and significance. On the feast of the Epiphany, or *Manifestation*, two other "manifestations" of Christ, one made on the occasion of His Baptism and the other when he changed water into wine at Cana, are commemorated in the Divine Office. But the central theme of the feast, which alone is mentioned in the Mass of the Epiphany, is the adoration by the Magi. The feast ranks with Easter and Christmas among the great feasts of the year, and in many countries is a holyday of obligation.

Here in the United States we have lost sight of the deep significance of the adoration by the Magi. To many of us, January 6th means little more than that the time has come for the dismantling of the Crib or the discarding of the Christmas tree. But the Church has always regarded the Epiphany as a most joyous feast, commemorative of God's bounteous calling of pagan nations to salvation. Pope St. Leo the Great thus invites Christians to participate in its celebration: "Let us recognize in the Magi who adore Christ, the primordial fruits of our vocation and of our faith; and let us celebrate with exultant spirits the beginnings of our blessed hope. . . . Just as they drew forth from their treasuries mystical gifts, to offer them to the Lord, so let us bring forth from our hearts those things which are worthy of God."

We should be more interested in the adoration by the Magi first, because of the Church's attitude towards it and, secondly, because the study and consideration of it is both intriguing and inspiring. The scope of this paper will be limited to a discussion of the Magi themselves, the star which led them, and their adoration of the Infant.

Following the opinion of some of the Fathers, we usually represent the Magi as being three in number. We call them Caspar, Melchior and Balthasar. Various different numbers and names are assigned to them by other peoples.

We commonly follow the tradition which says that the Magi were kings—a tradition that has given rise to many beautiful customs, such as the presentation of precious gifts to the divine Infant by kings and emperors and by their subjects, in imitation of the Magi. Saints Cyprian, Basil, Chrysostom, Jerome, Hilary, Bede and others believed the Magi to have been petty kings or princes.

The frequent picturization of one of the Magi as an Ethiopian may be explained in one of three ways. The first explanation is that Osorius, appealing to Indian traditions, asserted that two of the Magi, one a Persian and the other a Caramanian, associated with themselves the Indian king of Cranganore, who was nearly black and like an Ethiopian. Or we may explain it by saying that all of the Magi came from Arabia, one or more of them from that section of Arabia known as eastern Ethiopia. Some appeal to the traditional names of the Magi to determine whence they came: Caspar, as pointing to the Caspian Sea or to the Japhetites; Melchior, meaning king of light, as pointing to Egypt and western Ethiopia; Balthasar, a Chaldean name, as pointing to the countries around Babylon. The common teaching today is that the Magi came from Persia or Chaldea.

We sometimes wonder why the birth of Christ should have been announced to the Magi. Since the Nativity was the foreshadowing of the universal redemption He was to effect, it was fitting that His birth be proclaimed to men of every race and condition of life. It was announced to the Jews and to those who were simple and of lowly station, in the persons of the Shepherds; to the holy and just and to both sexes, in the persons of Simeon and Anna; to the Gentiles, the learned, the powerful, and sinners, in the persons of the Magi.¹

What became of the Magi after they returned to their own country we do not know. It is said that after the Resurrection St. Thomas the Apostle baptized them, and they became his associates in the preaching of the Gospel. A supposititious work attributed to Dexter, Bishop of Barcelona in the time of Theodosius the Great, records their martyrdom for the faith in 70 A. D., in these words: "In Arabia Felix, in the city of Sessania (of the Adrumeti), the martyrdom of the holy kings, the three Magi, Gaspar, Balthassar and Melchior, who adored Christ." A tradition says that they were martyrs and that their bodies were venerated first at Constantinople, transferred later to Milan, and taken to Cologne when Barbarossa

¹ *Summa Theol.*, III, q. 36, a. 3, *corp.*; a. 6, *corp.*

conquered Milan. Even to this day the relics of the Three Kings are venerated at a shrine in the Cathedral at Cologne.

When we wish to impart information to others by signs, we use those signs which are most familiar to them. At the time of Christ's birth the Gentiles, and especially astronomers such as the Magi were, devoted much time and attention to the study of the stars. We can therefore see that the use of a star as a sign to the Magi was very apt and fitting.

Discussion as to the part played by the star in guiding the Magi to Jesus has given rise to a score or more of theories. Controversy has waxed strong especially with regard to the meaning of the words of the wisemen, quoted in Matthew 2, 2: "Where is he that is born king of the Jews? For we have seen his star in the East, and are come to adore him."

Here is a good interpretation of the text: The Magi, when in the East, saw the star shining with great brilliancy towards Judea. The star soon disappeared. Having learned its meaning by divine inspiration, they set out to find the Child whose birth it announced. When they said they were come to adore Him they meant that their purpose was not merely to offer him the homage due to men of high rank and dignity, but to honor Him by an act of *latría*, which is offered to God alone. The Magi knew, then, at least vaguely, that the Child to whom they were going was divine.

It is easy to find arguments, some strong, some weak, against every statement made in the preceding paragraph. But the interpretation presented is sound, seems most consonant with the text of St. Matthew, and is held by many modern commentators and Scriptural scholars. We now pass on to a consideration of the part played by the star in leading the Magi from Jerusalem to Bethlehem.

To guide them thus, the star must have moved in a southerly direction, unlike ordinary stars. Furthermore, it must have been travelling close to the earth to guide the Magi onward and, by stopping, to point out the particular house where Jesus and Mary were. God could have made one of the ordinary stars leave its orbit and act as this guiding star did. But since miracles are not to be multiplied without necessity, we must seek another solution. Breen expresses the common opinion with regard to the nature of the star, in these words:

"Now let us look at this matter in a practical way. Let us represent to ourselves that we are seeking a certain habitation in some small village, and that God should deign to

show us thither by a star. We can readily see how close that star must be to the object of our search. A star must be close to the earth to point out a village; closer still, to distinguish a certain dwelling in that village. Resting on these sure foundations, we believe that the star of Bethlehem was a created light of great brightness, called into being by the omnipotence of God for this express purpose. . . .”

The use of the star to guide the Magi gave rise to the Order of the Star, instituted in France early in the eleventh century in honor of the Blessed Virgin, Star of the Sea. The purpose of the Order was to implore the Blessed Mother to be a guiding star to its members. The thirty knights of the chief nobility of France who were members of the Order bore on their clothing the figure of a star with this motto: “The stars show the way to the kings.” This Order was afterwards changed by King Louis XI of France into the Order of St. Michael.

Just when the Magi arrived in Bethlehem is unknown. Many have held that they entered into the holy presence of Jesus and Mary thirteen days after the Nativity. No proof for this theory can be adduced. One who holds it will encounter some difficulties, especially in giving a satisfactory explanation of the fact that on the occasion of the Purification, about three weeks later, Mary made the offering prescribed for *poor* people. Anyone might reasonably ask what had become of the gold presented by the Magi. From a study of the Gospels of Saints Matthew, Mark and Luke it seems most probable that the recorded events of Christ's early years took place in this order: the Annunciation, the Visitation, the Nativity, the Circumcision, the Presentation, the adoration by the Magi, the flight into Egypt, the massacre of the Holy Innocents, the return from Egypt.

The Magi offered gifts to the divine Infant: gold, a precious metal; frankincense, a gum which, when burnt, yields pleasant aromatic fumes; myrrh, a bitter aromatic gum of great value, used in making ointments for the body and for embalming. They were certainly gifts fit for a king. St. Bernard was of the opinion that the Magi offered gold to succor the poverty of the Holy Family, myrrh to strengthen Christ's infant limbs, frankincense to offset the unpleasant odors of the stable. Some suggest that the frankincense and the myrrh may have been sold and that their price, together with the gold, may have supported the Holy Family during their sojourn in Egypt. However, it is generally held that the frankincense was burned in honor of the Child.

St. Thomas Aquinas says that in their offering of gold, which signifies power, the Magi acknowledged Christ as the Creator; in the offering of myrrh, which is a preservative, they confessed Him as the conserver of all created things; in their offering of frankincense, they recognized him as the Redeemer—for just as frankincense is immolated in honor of God, so Christ was to be immolated on the Cross for the redemption of mankind. Some of the Fathers taught that, illuminated by the Holy Ghost, the Wisemen offered gold as to the great King, frankincense as to God, myrrh as to the Man who was to die for the salvation of mankind.

In treating of the journey to Bethlehem, spiritual writers are wont to dwell especially on the faith of the Magi, and on the wondrous ways by which God calls sinners back to Him or draws the virtuous into closer union with Him. The gifts offered are variously interpreted as significative of charity and of moral virtues. For example, St. Gregory says: "We offer gold, if we shine by the light of wisdom; frankincense, if we are redolent with fervent prayer; myrrh, if we mortify the vices of the flesh." Another interpretation, especially applicable to Religious, is: "Gold is voluntary poverty. For this poverty is most rich, and far more pleasing to God than all the gold in the world. Frankincense is obedience, whereby a man offers his own will and intellect, yea, his entire self, to God. Myrrh is fasting, mortification of the flesh; and what springs from mortification, chastity."

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