

# THE EPIPHANY OF THE LORD

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# **CHRIST MAKES US ONE WITH HIM**

## **A reflection from a sermon by St. Odilo of Cluny**

This is the day on which Christ was clearly revealed to the world, and to us. It is the day on which he consecrated the sacrament of baptism by receiving it in person; and it is our celebration of his drawing us into oneness with him through our baptism. It is also, according to the belief of the faithful, the day on which he changed water into wine at the wedding feast, even as he changes wine into his blood at our altar. He draws us more deeply into the ever-lasting wedding feast we will share in Heaven. It is also the day on which he changes the letter of the law into the grace of the Gospel, itself a transformation of earthly into heavenly wine. We must be part of this by our daily prayer and meditation.

Christ was baptized and the world was renewed; the very world put off its old state and began to put on the newness that is Christ's to give. This mystery was consecrated by the Holy Trinity. The Father's voice thundered, "*This is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased*"! The Holy Spirit appeared in the form of a dove. But it was the divine will that in the Son we should all be baptized and so turn wholly to our God and Lord. Although the entire Trinity was at work in the incarnation of the Word and the mystery of his baptism, the Son alone was baptized by John and so entered wholly into John's call to turn to God with all one's heart and mind and strength.

Except for sin, the Son experienced all the sufferings of the humanity he had assumed, even while remaining untouched by suffering in his divinity. Our suffering too is to be drawn into his and so offered to God. When God is worshipped in the child, the Virgin Mother is honored. When gifts are brought to the Child, who is human and divine, Mary's true motherhood is shown and exalted. All this is implied by the Gospel statement: "*Entering the house they found the child with Mary his mother, and bowing down they worshipped him. Then they opened their treasures and offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh.*"

We know that these gifts reveal hidden mysteries concerning Christ, but they also reveal mysteries in us. In God-made-human they proclaim kingship and Godhead and mortality. In us they reveal our sharing in these things. We are called to deeper faith in Christ's assumption of our mortal nature and a deeper faith in the reality of our reception of his divinity. St. John's Gospel proclaims, "*All things were made through Him and without Him nothing was made*". We too are God and we must give thanks continuously. Hasn't St. Paul called us to pray always? How better to do this than in thanksgiving? Which of us ever lacks a reason to give thanks, even if it is for a share in the Cross of Christ?

The office of a king is to lead others to the source of their good that they may fully live the gifts of God. That is how we are to share in Christ's kingship. We know Christ is the full wisdom of God. What can be wiser than to be always absorbed in praise of God for all the goods that we have received? As all the world has been created by God through Christ, so all the world continually thanks God for the gift of existence. We thank God not only for earthly but for heavenly life. We have been consecrated to these tasks with Christ. Give thanks!

# **FAITH THAT LIVES THROUGH WORKS**

**A reflection from a sermon by Bishop Thomas of Villanova**

What we behold through the feast of Epiphany is a faith that sees deeper than our ordinary senses. The Magi hadn't seen Christ perform miracles or mighty works. They hadn't beheld him walking on water, giving sight to the blind or raising the dead. They hadn't even heard his wisdom or teaching. They saw only a child living in extreme poverty and lowliness. Yet they recognized God and worshipped him and gave him their riches. That was wonderful faith indeed, as wonderful as that of the thief who prayed to him on the cross. Yet perhaps it is even more wonderful to recognize God when you see a baby feeding at its mother's breast than when you see one turning to God as he groans out his life in a horrible death. After all, the thief had heard of Jesus' works but the Magi had no such help.

How are we to learn from such an example of faith? Perhaps we can do it by accompanying those sages. It is wonderful to recognize God when we are shown him enthroned and crowned in glory but even more when consorting with animals and poor people. We don't even have the guidance offered by the light of a new star. We have only the light of faith by which to see Christ and learn from him. But we do have this light! This is our most reliable guide on the pathways of life.

Whoever you may be, if you thirst for God and for the vision of the Lord in all his eternal glory, if you long to share in divine happiness, if you truly long with all your heart to reach the goal of all human desiring, don't turn your eyes away from the God who dwells in the poor and with the humble. This presence can be grasped only by the light of the star of faith.

What must we do to seek God in fervor of spirit? We have to search diligently for Christ where he truly is present. We have to search perseveringly. We mustn't let any earthly circumstances blind us to God's presence. We mustn't let earthly riches made us blind to God as he really is among us. Don't even let the prospect of hardships or misfortunes hold you back or blind you.

The Magi show us where to find Christ. They show us that when we glimpse him it is time to open our treasures and pour them out in his service. The family of Jesus was poor. They used the Magi's gifts for the necessities of life. If we refuse this sharing, we refuse to recognize Christ where he really is. Isn't that what some have to face on the day of judgment, when they have to confess they did not recognize Christ in the poor and needy, and so didn't serve or help him?

We never have to appear in God's presence empty handed. We always have gifts to share with others. They are gifts God has given us. Didn't he give them to us so that we might share them? If you follow the star of faith you will not only find Christ, but will realize you have found him as you share the gifts you have already received. They may be simple gifts but they give life eternal.

## **PEACE THAT COMES THROUGH THOSE OF GOOD WILL**

### **A reflection from a sermon by St. Pope John XXIII**

Peaceable folk, those whom the Gospel calls blessed, don't stand idly by but are the active builders of peace. They are indeed peace"makers". But if we are to make peace we must learn first to pray for peace and to live in peace, and most especially in our family circle. Only then are we ready to be peacemakers on a wider stage, even in international relations.

True peace can come from God alone. Human efforts to establish universal peace are still very far from success. You see, the peace of Christ has a single characteristic in that it begins from a childlike and loving dependence on the will of God. All that weakens this is opposed to peace. First of all, because without this relationship there is sin. Those who live in good will live for the good just because it is good. They don't live for their own good but that of all. Without this there is sinful self-seeking that brings lack of respect for persons, manipulation and all sorts of abusive "using" of others. God's will is simply that we live in good will.

We see this illustrated in the fact that peace is first realized and enjoyed in the family. To obtain this we must show one another understanding and generosity. Even where there is affection there is always something to cause displeasure, so patience is required. So too we have to know how to correct ourselves. These are preparations for learning to make peace on a wider scale.

Let me quote from an encyclical: "Whereas, on the one hand, difficult situations are constantly increasing and the specters of poverty and hunger raise their heads, economic resources are used to create terrible instruments of ruin and death". This is an appeal to all who hold the fate of humankind in their hands. In the voice of Jesus Christ, we say: Abolish the resort to force. Great power is given you and must be used to construct and not destroy, to unite and not to divide, to give work and security and not to cause more tears to flow!"

On every level there are opportunities in which good will can, and must be, extended to all members of human society. This good will lies in courage and self-control, patience with others and inexhaustible charity. Charity sincerely desires only the good of others, and it never loses heart. It is not the noise that we make in our lives, or the things we see or do, that count, but the love with which we do the will of God. In the words of the Imitation of Christ, "*One is truly great if one has great love, who is humble of heart and sets no store by greatness or honors of this world, who is truly prudent in rejecting all that is not of Christ*".

We must be generous in the work which awaits us. We must work in charity and seek peace. We must remember that nothing done with God's will is done in vain. This is something we see only by the light that is faith. What else can we live by except this light? Live good will and you will also build peace.

## **SHARING FAITH AND THE WORKS OF FAITH**

### **A reflection from a sermon by St. Pope Leo the Great**

The world was on the way to perdition and God determined to rescue it and all of us. In merciful providence, our loving God foreordained the salvation of all peoples in Christ. Recall the promise made to Abraham that his offspring would be more numerous than the stars of heaven. These are the offspring he acquires, not according to the laws of nature, but by the fruitfulness of faith. This is how his offspring become countless—he is to be the father of all nations. He was given this hope from heaven.

How is the full number of the nations to enter the family of the patriarch and become sons of the promise? How are they to receive the blessing of Abraham? They are to do this by receiving the gift of faith. This is symbolically realized in the Magi that came to seek Christ from the East. In them we see all the peoples of the world begin to come to their God and Savior. No longer is God known only in Judea but in the entire world. Thus, it will happen that in every place God's name will be magnified.

We are among the instruments by which our God, the God of all the universe, becomes the God of all peoples of the earth. We have been taught by divine grace about the mysteries of redemption. We are invited to celebrate this day as the day of our first fruits. It is the day that brings to mind our initial call. We are to do this with spiritual joy. What I call to your attention is that this very joy is the primary instrument by which you are to accomplish this great mission.

Listen to the words of Scripture. *“God has qualified us to share the lot of the holy ones in light”*. He does this by *“delivering us from the power of darkness and transferring us into the kingdom of his Beloved Son”*. This is the fulfillment of Isaiah's words, *“the people who sat in darkness have seen a great light, and day has dawned upon those who dwelt in the shadow of death”*. Abraham, we are told, never saw this day except in hope and prophecy. We have begun to see it in fact. Isn't this enough cause for us to rejoice!

All that was foretold and prophesied has come to pass since the three Magi were called from their far-off land and led by a new star to recognize and worship the true King of heaven and earth. The same star, appearing in our hearts as faith, draws us to Christ, and draws us to share the joy of the Magi. Have you entered into a new life through Christ? Is this newness of life also a joy? Isn't it true that the greater a joy the more we can't stop ourselves from sharing it? Is there anything that people more gladly share than joy itself? But the fuller your sharing in the way of living that is Christ's, the fuller is your joy! If you will but live this joy you will draw more and more people, and peoples, to the Lord. All want to share joy!

How is the world to know that the joy we experience is based in a reality that genuinely transforms us? We see it in the works of love that spring from this joy. This is how the leadership of the star which is faith draws us to imitate the Magi's acts of homage and of sharing their own excitement. This is the light that shines from the children of light, leading others by the love that works through faith. Come, let your light shine before all!

## **GOD AND GOD'S JOY ARE FOUND IN LOWLINESS**

**A reflection taken from a homily by St. Basil the Great**

The star came to rest over the place where the child lay. When they saw this the Magi were filled with great joy. Do you want to welcome that joy into your heart? Then you have to be prepared to see Christ where he is truly found and to worship God in his real dwelling place.

We are summoned today to welcome the joy of Christ's coming into our hearts. But to do this we have to let our God transform our sight so that we can see the star which tells us where God is to be found. The angels sang: "*This day is born to us a Savior who is Christ the Lord. The Lord is our God and God has shown upon us!*" For fear of terrifying us God did not dazzle our eyes by appearing in the very form of God. God has come to us as a servant. Unless we open our hearts to see this truth, we can't be set free from blindness and from our former bondage.

The stars journey through the heavens, and the Magi journey from distant lands, and both would witness to the earth the reception of the redeemer. He is received in a cave used to stable animals. Can you look upon this fact and let gratitude fill your heart and mind? Can you look at this fact and find in it good reason to celebrate the world's salvation?

Think of these words: Today Christ is born in our humanity. That is what is so astounding—God reveals salvation through a seemingly count-for-nothing human baby. We can't any longer say, "You are earth and to earth you shall return". Now we have to say, "You are united to heaven and to heaven you shall be admitted". And all this is true because "*for us a child is born, to us a son is given, and sovereignty shall be upon his shoulders*".

Where do we find God, our saving God, today? The answer isn't that we find God in Bethlehem. We find God in those who need a cup of water or a place to lay their head. We find God in a pregnant girl who has no place in which to bring forth her child. Do you leap for joy when you find yourself face to face with such a person? If not then you haven't let the Magi and the star guide you to the place where the Christ is, and where he awaits your adoration and your gifts. Isn't that what Christ himself has taught us? Isn't the wonder the fact that God reveals Godhead in the lowliness of humanity—not only once but continually.

Like light shining through clear glass, the power of the Godhead shines in radiance through a human body now—for those whose inner gaze is pure. May the Lord grant us also to be counted among those who see, so that beholding God's splendor with unveiled faces we may begin our transformation from glory into glory by the grace and loving kindness of our Lord Jesus Christ, to whom be honor and glory for ever and ever.

## **WHAT IT MEANS FOR GOD TO TAKE ON A HUMAN NATURE**

**A reflection by Fr. Demetrius Dumm**

The divine Word took on a human nature so that the Father's love could be shared more fully with us as beloved children. This love is intended to make it possible for us to create vibrant and joyful human community, from the smallest family to the wide world of nations. God's final Word is a word of love and God's purpose for creation is fulfilled when all that wonderful variety is filled with love and lives in harmony.

St. John testifies that the disciples "*saw God's glory*", that is, they recognized the presence of God in the human person of Jesus. 'Glory' in the Bible refers to any perceptible manifestation of God's presence in our world. This glory was such as one would expect to see in the only-begotten, uniquely beloved Son of God. The love of God transfigured the human nature of Jesus so that he glowed with inner confidence and freedom. In Jesus the disciples saw what the love of God can do in a human being who receives it fully. Jesus thus becomes the final and perfect manifestation of grace and truth—the attributes of God most cherished by Israel.

'Grace' translates 'hesed' which means merciful, gracious love and expresses Israel's first and deepest experience of God. This was that wonderful impulse that caused God to choose us as his own People. 'Truth' translates 'emeth' which refers to the faithfulness and constancy of God in loving Israel. It was wonderful that God should have loved them; it was equally wonderful that God should not be fickle like humans, but ever-faithful in love. Jesus, in loving unto death, is the perfect and enduring sign and guarantee of the Heavenly Father's continued love and fidelity to all those chosen to be children of God.

This revelation of the nature of God as One-Who-Loves is not presented as a statement of fact. It is expressed in history, in events. For nothing is more real and tangible than creation itself. This word is spoken to all in every moment of time. Israel enjoyed the special world of Torah spoken to all the world—a word spoken to the heart more than to the mind. Those who dare to admit their hunger and who open their hearts to this Word will find their most personal history radically changed. Birth and death will seem unreal in comparison to this event!

## **LET GOD ASSUME YOUR HUMAN NATURE**

**A reflection from a sermon by St. Aelred of Rievaulx**

Isaiah says, “*Rise up and be enlightened, Jerusalem, for your light has come*”. Here is a reason why the Holy Church is enlightened, first in the three Magi and afterwards in all the nations. But for whom has the light come? Not for the perverse of heart who remain in their darkness, but for the upright of heart who recognize the light and long to adore it. The heart that longs because it is empty is told to rise up—i.e., to prepare itself for the things of heaven. But what about those who reply, “I don’t see these things of heaven; what are the things of the spirit that I ought to long for?”

In the Gospel the story is told of how there appeared to the nations a new star in the heavens; it called them to rise up from the things of earth and contemplate the true light, and so become newly born. Isaiah had said, “*The glory of the Lord has arisen for you*”. Then the Gospel adds that a star in which the Lord’s glory shone out appeared and indicated to the Magi, to kings as representing the Church which was to come, that they should look for a new guide to a new life.

All earth-bound and transitory things, all riches and worldly honors, are definitely beneath the dignity of a human person; one should not, then, seek simply the things of the earth. The glory of the Lord came to show more. As a result, the children of the earth have their hearts drawn to things of heaven and to the work of glorifying God above all that is of earth.

As kings the Magi came to Jerusalem and asked, “*Where is he who is born King of the Jews?*” Herod heard these words and was afraid. He was of the earth and darkness covered his mind and so he feared losing an earthly kingdom. He thought that the new born king would seek only an earthly kingdom, as he did. But the Magi, and the church of the nations, was not made afraid. The Holy Church sees the glory of God through Magi who announced God’s birth as a human being. Wasn’t the great glory of this Church seen when the kindreds of the earth came to adore a little child, poor and the son of poor people? And now in all places people offer adoration to Christ’s divinity-in-humanity and along with it gifts of gold and myrrh.

Each and every one of us was in captivity. We had to be told, “*Rise up!*” The star which led us is Sacred Scripture. Jesus Christ thus came to us. We no longer had an excuse for remaining in our sins. Jesus says, “*Blessed are the poor in spirit*”, showing the way we should walk with Jesus. We are to renounce our own will and imitate Christ. With the Gospel of peace to lead us, surely we can come to God by adoring God in Christ.

Yet it isn’t right you should come empty handed. Offer incense—pure prayer. Offer myrrh—mortification of your flesh. Offer gold—true charity. Gifts such as these God accepts most graciously. Then God’s star, Jesus Christ, will become incarnate in you and make you his own forever.