

**SOLEMNITY OF THE EPIPHANY
FEAST OF THE BAPTISM OF JESUS
THE FIRST WEEK IN ORDINARY TIME**

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Sun. The Solemnity of the Epiphany of the Lord
Jan.7 **GOD ALWAYS FINDS WAYS TO GIVE HIS GIFTS**
 A Reflection inspired by a text from Carroll Stuhlmueller

Mon. The Baptism of Jesus
Jan.8 **WHERE IS CHRIST LEADING YOU?**
 A Reflection from a sermon by St. Gregory Nazianzen

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 From the Morning Meditation of Pope Francis, Tuesday, 10 January 2017

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 A Reflection adapted from a homily by Sr. Phyllis Hunhoff OSB

Thurs. Day of Remembrance of the Dead
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 From Journeying with the Lord by Carlo Cardinal Martini

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 A Reflection from Journeying with the Lord by Carlo Cardinal Martini

Sunday

GOD ALWAYS FINDS WAYS TO GIVE HIS GIFTS

A Reflection inspired by a text from Carroll Stuhlmueller

The celebration of Epiphany is at the origin of our Christmas gift-giving. Jesus is God's "Great Gift" to us all and 'epiphany' means "making the gift known". We are celebrating God's making Jesus known to us, as a community and personally, and God's calling us to make Jesus known to others. We have received a gift and we are to give that same gift.

Originally, the Church celebrated three "manifestations" of Jesus as the Christ on this day: The manifestation to the pagan world, represented by the Magi, the manifestation to Israel, represented by Jesus' baptism, and the manifestation of the fullness of life to which God calls both Israel and all the world, represented by the wonder at the marriage feast in Cana. Nowadays, Epiphany focuses attention on the Magi and the world still to be evangelized.

The Magi came from some unspecified place in the "east", probably Babylon and/or Persia. This reflects the most surprising way in which God led them to Christ—through astrology and dream interpretation. In general, no one had preached the coming of a Savior to the world at large. So God drew these ancestors of ours to Christ using "fake knowledge" which they trusted—the highly developed system of astrological prediction that had gone out from Babylon to the whole ancient world. Whatever "special sign" might have been seen in the heavens was interpreted as the coming of a universal king to bring justice and peace to the world and, for whatever reason, this was linked to the Jews and so to a "king of the Jews". When consulted the Jewish sages interpreted this as the "Messiah", and so they were led to Jesus.

People come to Jesus for all sorts of reasons. They come because they took certain things for granted that seemed to point to him. Like the Magi, what they take for granted as truth may actually be false, but it doesn't matter so long as they come to Jesus, and so to the One God and to salvation. We aren't responsible for making sure people come to Jesus for the "right reasons". We aren't responsible for teaching them the objective truth as a replacement for whatever they believe. We know Jesus is our savior and the savior for all people on the earth. Let them come to their Savior and He will teach what they need to know to worship and love God with all their hearts and minds and strength, and to love their neighbors as Jesus loves.

This is the gift we have been given. All we are responsible for is giving that gift to others. Why they seek it or accept it is between them and God. What is important is that we give and that they receive—no matter our reasons for giving or theirs for accepting the gift. God will guide them to their Savior and then guide them again to their homes and to the others with whom they will share what they have received. We have no way to know whether what they receive matches what we sought to give them. That, once again, is between them and God. We give simply by living the gift we have received with all our heart and mind and strength. Let us do it in joy and gladness, giving God the glory and leaving others in God's most capable hands.

Monday

WHERE IS CHRIST LEADING YOU?

A Reflection from a sermon by St. Gregory Nazianzen

Today Christ experiences baptismal enlightenment. Let's go and experience it with Him! Those who are enlightened see the way that really leads to God, into the Promised Land that is the Kingdom of Heaven. That way is the perfect fulfillment of God's holy will. Christ is baptized by entering the river on whose other band is the Promised Land and he enters it by giving himself totally to the Heavenly Father's will. Let's go with Him down into the waters that wash away every other love than that of God. If we do this we may come up with Christ into the Kingdom!

As John was baptizing Jesus presented himself. He came to show the way to sanctification and to hallow all who walk in that way, even the very person who was to baptize him. Certainly, he was to leave behind the Old Adam, who did his own will and not the Heavenly Father's. He was preparing the way for us by hallowing the waters. He who is both flesh and spirit will baptize with the water of this world and with the Holy Spirit to save both.

John demurred: *"I am one who should be baptized by you"*, and not the other way round. That's what a lantern says to the sun and a voice says to the Word and a friend says to the bridegroom. John is the greatest born of woman but the Son is the firstborn of all. John leaped in his mother's womb, sensing the presence of the unborn Child of Mary. The forerunner adored the one to come after him. We might say what John said, but about our own unworthiness. John was to undergo the baptism of martyrdom, however, and may we be worthy of such grace.

Jesus passes through the water into the promise and he bears the entire world with him. Adam had gotten himself barred from paradise and his posterity with him. Jesus opens the gates of paradise not only for himself but for us who believe. A voice came from Heaven to bear witness to this and the Spirit assumed a bodily form in honor of that hallowed body in whom that same Spirit dwells. The Spirit appears as a dove to remind us that a more marvelous peace has now come to the world than an ordinary dove announced after the Great Flood.

Let us pay homage to Christ and his baptism. This is the day to keep a Feast and celebrate. This is the day to dedicate ourselves to being wholly purified and to keeping ourselves pure. God delights in nothing so much as conversion by turning to his will. For our benefit, every saving word is spoken and all the mysteries are revealed. We are to be lights in the world and to receive power to give life to others. We first have to receive enlightenment ourselves. Then we have a clearer and fuller understanding of divine truth than ever before. It comes to us from the one Godhead who dwells in Jesus Christ. He is our Lord! Let us give him glory and love him forever and ever.

Tuesday

THE ASTONISHED INNKEEPER

From the Morning Meditation of Pope Francis, Tuesday, 10 January 2017

How did Jesus teach with an authority that “astonished” and conquered, while the scribes and the doctors of law could only impose laws, but “not enter the hearts of the people”? Pope Francis’ reflection during Mass at Santa Marta on Tuesday morning, 10 January illustrated the differences between the “real authority” of Jesus, and the “formal authority” of the others. The eloquent comparison encourages us to reflect on the danger to those who are called “to teach the truth” and who can fall into the temptation of “clericalism” instead of following the path of “closeness to the people”.

The Pope was inspired by a passage taken from the Gospel of the day (Mk 1: 21-28) in which it is said that “they were astonished”. Why this “astonishment”? asked the Pope. “Because of the way in which Jesus taught”, he replied, adding that Jesus “taught them as one who has authority, and not as the scribes, that is, the doctors of the law”. Indeed, all of those people did teach, “but they did not enter the heart of the people” and therefore had no authority.

Authority, the Pope explained, is a recurring theme in the Gospel. We see this in particular when Jesus finds himself “questioned, many times” by the doctors of the law, the Pharisees, priests, and scribes: “But by what authority do you do this? Tell us! You have no authority to do this! We have the authority”. At the base of this query, explained Francis, lies “the problem of formal authority and real authority”. While the scribes and Pharisees enjoyed “formal authority”, Jesus had “real authority”. But, the Pope added, “not because he was a seducer”. In fact, if it is true that Jesus brought a “new teaching”, it is also true that “Jesus himself said he was teaching the law down to the last detail”. The novelty, compared to the doctors of the law, lay in the fact that “Jesus was teaching the truth but with authority”.

Thus, it is important to understand in what lies “the difference of this authority”. The Pope clarified this by explaining the characteristics of real authority. “First of all, “ the Pope stressed, “Jesus’ authority was a humble authority. Jesus taught with humility”. He bore the characteristics of “servitude”, to the extent that he advised his disciples to act in the same way: “Those who rule nations lord it over them, but it shall not be so among you. Let the greatest be the one who serves: he shall become the least, and he shall be the greatest”. Jesus, therefore, “served the people; he explained things so that the people could clearly understand. He was at the service of the people. He had the manner of a servant and this gave him authority”.

On the contrary, the doctors of the law “had the mindset of princes”, and they thought: “we are the teachers, the princes, and we teach you. Not service: we command; you obey”. Therefore, even if people listened to and respected [them], “they did not feel that the [doctors of the law] had authority over them”. Jesus however, “never passed by like a prince; he was always the servant of all and this is what gave him authority”.

Another characteristic “of Jesus’ authority”, the Pope added, “was closeness”. The Gospel reads: “Jesus was close to the people, was among the people” and the people themselves “would not let him leave”. The Lord “was not allergic to the people. Touching lepers, the sick, did not disgust him”. And this “being close to the people”, Francis stressed, “gives authority”.

“This,” concluded the Pope, “is the astonishment”: the same “astonishment of the people” before Jesus, “because his authority was a humble authority, one of service; it was an authority close to the people and it was a consistent authority”.

Wednesday

LIVING AS A CHILD OF OBEDIENCE

A Reflection adapted from a homily by Sr. Phyllis Hunhoff OSB

From St. Gregory the Great's writings about the life of St. Benedict we learn that the noble family of Rome gave boys to his monastery to be educated and learn to live as monks. That is how Maur and Placid came to Benedict. They regarded him as a father and as one who taught them God's word and will and the virtue of obedience. Four of the major miracles attributed to Benedict involved one of the two boys. The stories show how they trusted and relied upon him when things got difficult and how they believed that, as the Holy Rule says, Benedict was seen as another Christ for the community and its members.

When Benedict drove out a demon who was preventing a monk from praying peacefully Maur first spent two full days praying for the monk. When Benedict recovered the metal part of a bushwacker that a monk had lost in the nearby lake, it was Maur who brought the problem to Benedict's attention. When Benedict prayed that God would create a spring on a hillside where a small monastery was located, Placid prayed with him all night long for this miracle. When Maur ran on water to save Placid from drowning he was so taken up with obeying Benedict that he paid no attention to the fact that he wasn't running on dry land. Both he and Placid attributed what happened to Benedict's prayer.

The families who literally gave Maur and Placid to the monastery, did this because they believed the boys would learn God's word there. The boys weren't needed by their families to produce a coming generation and might cause their father's inheritance to be divided in a way that could injure the family. They weren't "needed" in a worldly sense and so were "given to God". Clearly, Benedict's monasteries had a very good reputation and their monks were seen as living an exemplary Christian life. What better gift to give partly-unwanted children?

The reputation was confirmed by the kind of persons Maur and Placid became—abbots themselves and finally saints. They learned to love and rejoice in a life given to God. They became joyful "sons of obedience", not just to Benedict but to God. A monastery today which had a reputation for forming holy and saintly members with this character would be as attractive now as it was in Benedict's time. This reputation enabled monks to become educators, not in the academic sense but in the way a Christian family or community ideally wants to form its members. Those who came to Benedict really became holy and attractive persons who knew how to love one another, and all, in Christ. This is what they passed on to the monks of the monasteries they themselves came to govern. We don't know how people became aware of the quality of the Christian lives led by Benedict's monks, and so decided to give children to God by entrusting them to Benedict's way of monastic life, as we see it in his Rule for Monks. Those who live for God surrender their future as well as themselves to God and allow him to draw others to learn from them and follow their examples. That is what we celebrate as we remember Sts. Maur and Placid, precisely as disciples of St. Benedict.

Thursday

ACCEPTING THE GIFT THAT IS COMMUNITY

From Journeying with the Lord by Carlo Cardinal Martini

Community is a gift. It isn't founded on our collaborative efforts, nor on our sincere desire for friendship. These things are important and must be kept in mind but 'being together', as it is called in the New Testament, is a gift from God. It is a participation in the 'being together' that we call the Trinity. We find the model of this in Jesus being together with his disciples. God shares this Trinitarian community with the Church and in the Church each how to share in this community experience.

We are not only together with other now-living members of Christ but with those who have left this world and entered that of God's Kingdom of everlasting life. As long as we are joined in Christ, we are together with one another. This means that we are helping and being helped by all who are together in this way. By accepting the Word of God, we become members of an authentic community in Christ, living according to the laws of Trinitarian fellowship; i.e., of mutual love.

Lived Christian fellowship begins in the heart. It is from within that intentions come and from them come acts of love, or its opposite. The failure of love and the dominance of evil intentions are what cause division and all that results. But we know that people bound in fellowship with us in Christ are animated by love, a love like Christ's that fills hearts. Those who are already with God are filled with love for us; it is inseparable from their love for God. Are we mindful of their love? Are we always aware, in some way, that we are loved actively and without hesitation by the many who have gone before us, especially those we knew and were joined within fellowship already upon this earth?

A description of a community based on charity is given us in St. Paul's letter to the Philippians. We are told this charity lives on God's word as ordinary life depends on breathing. The Word of God, not just the Scriptures but Christ, dwells all around us and within us. A Christian community finds in this its Bread of Life. This bread is an indispensable food for the community.

Listen to St. Ambrose: *"When I read the Divine Scriptures God returns to walk in the earthly paradise. Christ and Divine Scripture are the remedy for every distasteful thing and the only refuge from temptation."* What is temptation but the pull of something or someone other than God, hinting that it can free us from whatever is bothering or worrying us at present? But that is a lie. We turn to God and to God's Word, and we do this not simply on our own but with the help of others, itself given us in love and as a sign of love.

We remember those who have gone before us, and we remember how they persevered to the end in clinging to God and God's promises, especially by recalling Scripture passages to their mind and praying with them. To think of these friends is to be drawn to God and to God's promises. What more do we need than this gift of grace? In it, we are actively united around God and in love. This is part of God's gift of community.

Friday

LET GOD TAKE ON 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*”. Why is the Holy Church enlightened, first in the three Magi and later in all the nations? Ask rather, for whom has the light come? Not for the perverse of heart who remain in their darkness, but for the upright of heart who can recognize the light and, even if they don’t know it, long to adore it. The heart that longs, then, because it is empty is told to rise —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 a story is told of how there appeared to the nations a new star in the heavens; it called them to rise from the things of earth and contemplate the true light and so become new-borns. Isaiah had said, “*The glory of the Lord has arisen for you*”. Then the Gospel added 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 true dignity of a human person. One shouldn’t seek simply earthly things. The glory of the Lord came to show there is more. As a result, the children of the earth have their hearts drawn to heavenly things and the work of glorifying God above all that is merely 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; darkness covered his mind. So he feared losing an earthly kingdom. He thought that the newborn king would only seek such an earthly kingdom, as he did. But the Magi, and the church of the nations, was not made afraid by this. 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 that 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 we can surely come to God by adoring him in Christ. Yet it isn’t right we 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.

Saturday

MARY AND GOD'S PLAN OF SALVATION

A Reflection from Journeying with the Lord by Carlo Cardinal Martini

At the center of God's plan of salvation, we find Mary. This fact is the key to our understanding of woman's dignity, of human dignity and of that of the world and its history. This means that not only is life sacred from the first, a sacredness calling for respect, love and protection, but that from the beginning each person is truly the object of God's loving plan.

God's plan puts love into our hearts, God's love. We are all invited to listen to the voice of love from the beginning of our existence. We learn to do this by venerating the beginning of the life of the Virgin Mother of God, a life without sin. We don't pray the "Hail Mary" simply out of devotion but to evoke the mysteries that conquer our fears and illumine for us the dignity of every woman and human person. This prayer proclaims a hope-filled event.

Scripture describes the dark and negative existence into which God comes and intervenes by bringing light and salvation. Adam was afraid. We have been afraid from the beginning. This comes from within. We fear God because we are uneasy about ourselves. We feel dissatisfaction with the life we have received and want to hide ourselves, even from ourselves.

St. Paul's Letter to the Ephesians responds to this fear. *"Before the world was made, God chose us, chose us in Christ, to be holy and spotless and to live through love in his presence"*. The word 'us' refers first to the heirs of the covenant, chosen by God ages before. The Church takes this to refer to the Daughter of Zion who is Mary. She is the first of believers. She is the first who hoped fully in God's promise of Christ. Mary was predestined *"to be an adopted daughter, to be holy and spotless in God's loving presence"*.

The Mother of God is our light. She shines on our world and makes us feel proud to be a human person. We share in her life and mission. Mary, who was a creature of such interior cleanliness as to challenge our own moral dissatisfactions, helps us contemplate her sincerity and humility in God's presence. We can always rejoice because we see Mary before us. It is part of our call to share all this with others so that they too can be proud and grateful to be human and themselves.