

“The Light of Christ that Leads Us Safely Home”

Mass to Mark 20th Anniversary of Perpetual Adoration at Nativity Parish, Solemnity of the Epiphany

January 3, 2016, Nativity Parish, Menlo Park

Introduction

In 1833, the famous Catholic convert Blessed Cardinal John Henry Newman fell dangerously ill with typhoid fever while travelling in Italy. He was far from home, and longed to return to his native England where, he was convinced, God still had work for him to do. He lay ill for nearly three weeks before he was able to travel home, and it was during this travel that he wrote his famous poem, “Lead, Kindly Light.”

His sentiments and the symbolism in this poem are certainly appropriate to the mystery we celebrate on this Solemnity of the Epiphany, for it was the kindly light of a star that led the Magi to the Christ child so they could pay homage to him.

The Epiphany Mystery

Just who were these mysterious Magi, anyway? We sometimes refer to them as “wise men.” The Gospel tells us that they came from the east, which could only mean Persia, as that was the only significant civilization east of Palestine at that time. This was an advanced civilization, and these were learned men among their people: they were learned in the sciences, they could read the constellations and other natural phenomena and so detect messages through them from above. They were apparently also familiar with Jewish Scriptures, and, so it seems, they were eager to learn beyond the confines of their own culture. We could say that they were the renaissance men of their time.

This, actually, is all quite remarkable, because these Magi were Gentiles, that is, *not* of the original chosen people of God. They were not privy to the revelation that the Lord, the one, true God, had given to His people Israel. Nonetheless, they were able to read the signs of the times, using their God-given intelligence to seek the truth by detecting the signs pointing to it and following those signs to the very end. And so here, having learned of the prophecy of the birth of a king from the sacred writings of a foreign people, they perceived an unusual natural phenomenon in a star and were able to navigate by it to reach the newborn king.

The homage they pay to this newborn king is, in itself, a prophecy, the fulfillment of which St. Paul writes in his Letter to the Ephesians from which we just heard in our Second Reading: “the Gentiles are coheirs, members of the same body, and copartners in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.” He explains that this is a mystery which was made known to him by revelation, and that he has now been entrusted with the stewardship of this grace. That is to say, while those who had previously been out in the dark, outside of the people of God, may now become grafted onto this people,

someone has to make this known, someone has to announce this Good News. That is the stewardship to which St. Paul is referring, his call to be an apostle.

This Good News is the one faith entrusted by Christ to his Church, which the Church is called to proclaim in every age. With all of its diversity of race and language and nationality and customs, the People of God that is the Church is unified in the one Profession of Faith and practice of that faith. And it is the Most Holy Eucharist that is the principle of that unity of faith. As the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church of the Second Vatican Council, *Lumen Gentium*, states, the Church – lay faithful and clergy together – “strengthened by the body of Christ in eucharistic communion, ... manifest in a concrete way that unity of the People of God which this holy sacrament aptly signifies and admirably realizes” (n. 11).

Twenty Years of Perpetual Adoration

We can, then, can detect another meaning of this “kindly light” that leads us safely home: the light that is the sanctuary lamp. That sanctuary lamp indicates a presence, an abiding presence, that is for us a source of strength and security. How appropriate that we celebrate these twenty years of Perpetual Eucharistic Adoration here at Nativity parish on this Solemnity of the Epiphany, for the word “epiphany” in the ancient world meant, as it means in Sacred Scripture, the appearance or manifestation of the divine. Here we have the Son of God, the Second Person of the Most Holy Trinity, who took on a human body in his birth (his nativity) in Bethlelem 2,000 years ago, always present to us in the substance of his body, the Most Holy Eucharist, which signifies and realizes the unity of his mystical body, the Church.

While the tabernacle serves to shelter the Blessed Sacrament, protecting it from profanation, Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament exposed outside of the tabernacle is meant to intensify our awareness of this divine presence in our midst, and lead us to a more faithful, fruitful and reverent participation in the celebration and reception of this Most Holy Sacrament. Thank you for your stewardship of this most precious treasure God has entrusted to His Church. How great a need we have in our time to reclaim appreciation for this sacred gift and the awe and respect we owe to our Lord in the Blessed Sacrament – in our attitudes, in our behavior at worship and especially in the way we receive Holy Communion, and in our entire way of life, ensuring that we are always in a state of grace before daring to approach to receive the Lord in this Sacrament. How great a need we have in our time to reclaim a sense of the sacred in general. Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament is a source of such renewal for the Church. Thank you for your witness to this calling, perpetually, for the last twenty years.

The Magi paid homage to the Lord and lay prostrate before him. They, who could not be guided by the light of revelation, nonetheless had open minds and hearts to be guided by right reason and a natural sense of the sacred. We, on the other hand, have known this light, and so we need both right reason and integral faith if we are to be true stewards of this light, this Good News, so that through us the light of Christ can lead others home to him. Right before Mass Monsignor Otellini pointed out to me how

this reality is depicted on the doors of the tabernacle of your church. The tabernacle depicts the Magi presenting their gifts to the Christ child, but there are only two Magi depicted. The idea is that we are called to be the third of the Magi, offering our gift to the Lord as a responsible stewards of the blessings He has given us for the sake of the proclamation of the Gospel. We need to know, though, how to read the signs of our own times, recognizing that God's revelation is never at odds with the created order, but builds upon it and uses it to reveal to us higher truths.

For Cardinal Newman, that light led him home to the Catholic Church. But that, really, was only the penultimate step. The ultimate destination is our true home, our eternal home, God's Kingdom. As long as we are in this world we are far away from home, sometimes even feeling like we are immersed in gloom and darkness, as did Cardinal Newman during those days of very serious illness in a foreign country far away from home. But our Lord is always present with us, guiding us safely home, as all of the sanctuary lamps in the world remind us.

Conclusion

I pray that the continued devotion of Perpetual Adoration here at Nativity parish may spread throughout our Archdiocese, so that our love for the Lord in the Blessed Sacrament may renew our local Church, reaping ever greater fruit for the New Evangelization and for the flourishing of religious vocations and of family life. But we need to always follow that light, the light that will guide us safely through the trials and challenges of life in this world so that, at the end of our life, we may pass from this temporary dwelling place of time to our true homeland of eternity with God.

This, indeed, is what Blessed John Newman prayed during that fateful illness, and is the prayer that captures the deepest desire of every true Christian:

Lead, Kindly Light, amidst th'encircling gloom,
Lead Thou me on!

...

Lead, Savior, lead me home in childlike faith,
Home to my God.
To rest forever after earthly strife
In the calm light of everlasting life.