

HOM Epiphany 2024 B January 4

Perhaps we can see something prophetic and hopeful in the likelihood that the Magi were from what is present-day Iran and they journeyed to what is present-day Israel to pay homage to Jesus Christ who is the King of peace for the world.

According to Bishop Robert Barron in his homily for today, the Magi, from Persia, understood that the star they were observing was a sign that: 1) a new King had been born, 2) that He was the King of Jews, and also 3) that He was the King of the Whole World. This is why they made the effort – the journey – to pay homage to Him and to bring Him the mysterious gifts of gold for a King, frankincense for a Deity, and myrrh for a Victim-Priest.

Barron notes that even Pontius Pilate somehow knew that Jesus was King, not only of the Jews, but of the world. His sign placed on Jesus' cross identifying Jesus as "*King of the Jews*" was written in all the major languages of the time: Latin, Greek, and Hebrew. It seems it was meant to be a subtle declaration that Jesus is Universal King.

It is interesting to me that the "making known of Jesus" to all the world has now stalled. *Making Jesus known to others* began at his birth with the announcement made to the shepherds by an angel. It expanded with the appearance of a "New Guiding Star" to the Magi. It continued after Pentecost with the Spirit-filled proclamation of the Gospel message and God's Kingdom by the apostles to all people, Jews and Gentiles alike. It has progressed rather steadily over the centuries, having reached the ends of the earth in our time, such that the only country in the world without a Christian Church is now Afghanistan.

For the last 120 years, however, since about 1900, the beginning of the 20th century, it has been stalled with the percentage of the world's population who believe in Jesus remaining at about one-third. Today, among the world's 8 billion people, about 2.5 billion or 32 % are Christians, and among these about 1.3 billion are Catholics. So Catholics make up a little more than half of the world's Christians, and all Christians together make about one-third of the people on earth.

But why is the percentage of Catholics and non-Catholic Christians in the world not growing? It seems that we have reached some kind of plateau that sooner or later will give way to a new rise or perhaps a fall – a new expansion or shrinkage -- of the Church.

In his Apostolic Exhortation, *The Joy of the Gospel*, Pope Francis calls for a new evangelization focusing on raising up the poor and entering into dialogue with the world, particularly non-Christians and non-believers in order to expand Christianity. Pope Benedict XVI, however, looking into the not too distant future, foresaw a smaller, more faith-filled Church in a culture more hostile to it.

The Scriptures themselves (e.g., Luke 18: 8; Matt. 24: 12; 2 Thess. 2: 3) attest to an eventual shrinkage of Christianity. They refer to a final trial for the Church -- including a supreme religious deception, a great apostasy or falling away from the faith, and intense persecution of the faithful -- that is to come before the return of Jesus.

Nevertheless, the job of faithful Catholics, in every age, is to continue to make Jesus known to others and to invite them into saving oneness with Him. Of the many ways we can do this – prayers, good example, good works of charity and mercy, witnessing to the truth -- there is something that underlies all of these that is necessary for making them effective and fruitful. That essential underlying element is communicating the Holy Spirit to those to whom we wish to make Christ known and whom we seek to bring into saving oneness with Him.

In other words, along with passing on our faith, hope, and love to others, we must also pass on to them the grace of the Holy Spirit that will enable them to know and love Jesus as we do and to live in oneness with Him as we do.

The best way to do this is for us to give Jesus a gift FOR THEM. And the gift we should bring TO JESUS FOR THEM is the deliberate, free, total, reciprocal, and formal give of ourselves.

Think of the people you know who may know of Jesus but who do not know Him and love Him by keeping His word and living in oneness with Him in doing the Father's will. They may be family members, other relatives, social or sports friends, co-workers, people we've seen on television or read about, famous people, celebrities, government leaders.

They may never know of our gift TO JESUS FOR THEM until they reach heaven, but they will forever be grateful for it, and our eternal joy will be made complete because of this.

On this feast of the Epiphany, brothers and sisters, let's be like the Magi. May we pay homage to the universal king, the tiny Creator, who once lay in a manger to teach us that He is also the Bread of Eternal Life. And as we receive the gift of Himself to us in Holy Communion, may we give Him the gift that He so desires from us – the gift of ourselves, for the true good of others – all those whom we hold dear and all those He holds dear.

Here are the words to pray silently and sincerely at Holy Communion for this: I AM ALL YOURS, O MOST LOVING JESUS, THROUGH MARY YOUR MOTHER WITH THE HELP OF ST. JOSEPH.