

# Catholic Review Column: We Three Kings

On his last Christmas as Archbishop of Washington, the late Cardinal James Hickey, my friend and mentor, gave me a gift. It was a small ivory statute of Our Lady in a beautiful leather triptych.

"I bought this many years ago," he explained, "to give to a bishop I worked for - but he died before I could give it to him. I stored this gift away, knowing that someday I'd know who to give it to."

I was deeply touched by that gift and it remains a constant reminder of the bonds of love and understanding I shared with the late cardinal.

On the feast of the Epiphany, which we celebrate this Sunday, the church celebrates the arrival of the Magi and the gifts they presented to the newborn infant Jesus. In obedience to the brightly shining star, these Gentiles from the East sought out the child-king born in the stable at Bethlehem. They are described as bringing him gifts which express an extraordinary grasp of who Jesus is and what his mission will be:

- Gold to express his royal dignity;
- Frankincense to express the offering he would make; and
- Myrrh to express his burial.

And the Magi receive in return an extraordinary gift. They see the tiny child whose love would one day be proclaimed everywhere on earth. They saw the Word made flesh and it altered their lives forever.

Let me offer you three points to reflect on, three ways you and I can imitate the Magi as we prepare to celebrate the Mystery of the Epiphany.

First, make the journey to Christ. At any time, in any place, we can leave that far-distant place in our hearts of alienation from God and the things of God; we can leave behind the things that spoil our relationship with Christ and with other people. The name for the journey you and I have to make is conversion: conversion of our

mind and heart from sin to God's goodness. It's not a journey we make just once. It is a journey to be made each and every day.

The second point pertains to what we have to offer Christ. What the Lord wants from us is not gold, frankincense and myrrh, but rather the gift of our love. The Lord is not looking for an extravagant gift - but he does want a costly gift: he wants us to make him the center of our lives!

The final way can be found in this Sunday's Gospel, where we will meet King Herod. When he met the Magi and found out they were looking for a newborn king, Herod was upset; he figured he now had a rival. So Herod asked the Magi to stop in and see him after they found the new king so he too could go and offer the newborn child his homage. Of course, what Herod really wanted to do was to kill any potential competitor. So in a dream the Magi were instructed not to double back to see Herod but rather to return to their country "by another route." The same message is given to us this Epiphany: Our life too has to change direction! We must move away from what destroys the reign of Christ in our hearts and move toward our true home, which is heaven. We have to pray for the guidance of the Holy Spirit so that we may walk in the ways of the Lord!

So on this Feast of the Epiphany, we celebrate yet again that God our Father has given us the gift that counts the most. He didn't give us something - he gave us someone - his very own Son in the flesh. And when the Son of God assumed our human nature to become one of us, that gift expressed better than anything else the bonds of love and understanding that God wants to forge with us as individuals and as a community of faith.