

# Solemnity of the Epiphany of the Lord

Dear friends in Christ,

## Introduction

What a joy it is for me to celebrate Mass here for the first time today! I was able to visit this church briefly last year, but now I'm so happy to be here with all of you for the celebration of Mass - and on such a beautiful day, the Solemnity of the Epiphany of the Lord.

I'd also like to say a special word here at St. Michael's about a priestly vocation which took root in this parish, that of Msgr. Arthur Valenzano, who today serves as the Rector of the Basilica of the Assumption in Baltimore. He was baptized here, and he celebrated his first Mass here. Msgr. Valenzano is one of the finest priests I have ever known, and I am personally grateful to this parish for nurturing his priestly vocation. Please join me in praying that many more young men from this parish and from throughout the archdiocese will hear Christ's voice calling them to the Sacred Priesthood, and that they will be given the grace to respond with courage and generosity.

## The Star

Dear friends, during these days of the Christmas season, we read once again the beloved Gospel passages which tell of the birth of Our Lord, and of the events which followed, which were recorded with love by the Evangelists.

One of the most familiar and mysterious elements of the Scripture readings of these days is the Star of Bethlehem, the star which led the Magi from the east to journey toward the Christ Child and to find Him - and to find *in* Him the truth which gives light and life to the whole world.

So what was the star? Where did it come from? Well, back in the 17th century, an astronomer names Johannes Kepler calculated that in 6 to 7 B.C., which is around the time Christ was born, there was a convergence of the stars Jupiter, Saturn, and

Mars, within the constellation Pisces. This same convergence occurred again in 1604, and in that year was accompanied in that year by a supernova, which is an enormous explosion in a distant star, an explosion which produces iridescent rays of streaming light.

Is this the explanation of the origin of the Star which appeared at the time of the Birth of Christ? It's quite possible, although we cannot know with certainty. What we *do* know with certainty is that the Divine Child, who was found there by the travelers from the East and, through them, by all the nations, is the One of whom St. John wrote, "...in him was life, and this life was the light of the human race."

### **Gold, Frankincense, and Myrrh**

Dear friends, at this point we might profitably ask: what does this have to do with you and me? Let's begin with the gifts brought by these wise men from the east: gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

Gold signifies that the Child is a king. Yet he is not a king in the sense in which the world imagines kings. He was born not in a palace with royalty, but in a stable, near animals and shepherds. His only throne was a Cross, his only crown was a crown of thorns. Yet his kingdom is "an eternal and universal kingdom, a kingdom of truth and life, a kingdom of holiness and grace, a kingdom of justice, love, and peace."

Frankincense signifies that the Child is a priest. Both in the Old Testament and in the New Testament, we see that incense is used by priests. It is burned in sacrifice to God, and represents both the purifying of our worship, and our prayers ascending, with a sweet fragrance, to the presence of God. In the Old Testament, the temple priests offered the blood of bulls and goats in sacrifice to God for sins. Yet Christ, the fulfillment of all the prophecies of the Old Testament, offers *himself*. The Blood he shed on Calvary is "the Blood of the new and eternal covenant, which [is] poured out for many, for the forgiveness of sins." Indeed, when every validly ordained priest of the New Covenant stands at the Altar and, [by the sacramental configuration of his Ordination,] he makes present the once-and-for-all Sacrifice of Calvary, here and now; he applies the never-ending grace of that Sacrifice to you and me, for the salvation of our souls.

Finally, and similarly, myrrh signifies that the Child would give his life in sacrifice

for sins. Myrrh was an embalming spice used in the time of Our Lord. Indeed, as the Church prays during Easter time, “By the oblation of his Body, he brought the sacrifices of old to fulfillment in the reality of the Cross and, by commending himself to [God the Father] for our salvation, showed himself [to be] the Priest, the Altar, and the Lamb of sacrifice.”

### **What Use Would It be to You ...**

These gifts show us clearly who this Child *is*. And yet, in the words of the second-century theologian Origen of Alexandria, “What use would it be to you that Christ once came in the flesh – if he did not enter your soul?”

So how is it that Christ enters our souls? Dear friends, Christ gives himself to us *through His Church*. And he enters our souls through the Sacraments. Indeed, “The visible presence of our Redeemer,” said St. Leo the Great, “has passed into the Sacraments.”

During these beautiful and hopeful days of the Christmas season, let us pray especially for our brothers and sisters who have been away from the Church, and away from the sacraments. Let us pray that the love and the innocence of the Christ Child will touch their hearts and minds, and move them with the grace to return to Christ’s mercy, and to the life of grace in the communion of the Church.

We pray this because we want everyone to discover the treasure the Wise Men found – the treasure which, by God’s grace, *we* have found. We pray this because the Child of Bethlehem was born for our salvation. As Saint John the Evangelist wrote, “He came to what was his own, but his own people did not accept him... But to those who did accept him he gave power to become children of God.”

So may it be said of us – and may it be said of many others *through* us — “And we saw his glory, the glory as of the Father’s only Son, full of grace – and truth.”

May God bless us, and keep us always in His love!