



The Holy See

SOLEMNITY OF THE EPIPHANY

HOMILY OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI

Vatican Basilica

Saturday, 6 January 2007

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

We celebrate with joy the Solemnity of the Epiphany, the "manifestation" of Christ to the peoples who are represented by the Magi, mysterious figures who came from the East. We celebrate Christ, the destination of the pilgrimage of peoples in search of salvation.

In the First Reading we listened to the Prophet, inspired by God, to contemplate Jerusalem as a beacon of light which guides all the peoples on their journey through the darkness and fog of the earth.

The glory of the Lord shines on the holy City and attracts first of all his own children, displaced and dispersed, but also, at the same time, the pagan nations who come to Zion from all sides as to a common homeland, enriching it with their goods (cf. *Is* 60: 1-6).

The Second Reading presents what the Apostle Paul wrote to the Ephesians, that is, through God's loving designs the convergence of Jews and Gentiles in the one Church of Christ was "the mystery" made manifest in the fullness of time, the "grace" of which God had made him steward (cf. *Eph* 3: 2-3, 5-6).

In a little while we will say in the Preface: "Today, you revealed in Christ your eternal plan of salvation and showed him as the light of all peoples".

Twenty centuries have passed since that mystery was revealed and brought about in Christ, but it

has not yet reached fulfilment. My beloved Predecessor, John Paul II, began his Encyclical on the Church's mission by writing: "As the second Millennium after Christ's Coming draws to an end, an overall view of the human race shows that this mission is still only beginning" (*Redemptoris Missio*, n. 1).

Several spontaneous questions arise: in what sense is Christ still the *lumen gentium*, the Light of the peoples, today? What point - if one can so describe it - has the universal journey of the peoples toward God reached? Is it in a phase of progress or of regression? And further: who are the Magi today? How, thinking of today's world, should we interpret these mysterious figures of the Gospel?

To answer these questions, I would like to return to what the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council said in this regard. And I am pleased to add that immediately after the Council, the Servant of God, Paul VI, exactly 40 years ago on precisely 26 March 1967, dedicated to the development of the peoples his Encyclical *Populorum Progressio*.

The whole of the Second Vatican Council was truly stirred by the longing to proclaim Christ, the Light of the world, to contemporary humanity. In the heart of the Church, from the summit of her hierarchy, emerged the impelling desire, awakened by the Spirit, *for a new epiphany of Christ in the world*, a world that the modern epoch had profoundly transformed and that, for the first time in history, found itself facing the challenge of a global civilization in which the centre could no longer be Europe or even what we call the West and the North of the world.

The need to work out a new world political and economic order was emerging but, at the same time and above all, one that would be both spiritual and cultural, that is, a renewed humanism.

This observation became more and more obvious: a new world economic and political order cannot work unless there is a spiritual renewal, unless we can once again draw close to God and find God in our midst.

Before the Second Vatican Council, the enlightened minds of Christian thinkers had already intuited and faced this epochal challenge.

Well, at the beginning of the third millennium, we find ourselves in the midst of this phase of human history that now focuses on the word "globalization".

Moreover, we realize today how easy it is to lose sight of the terms of this same challenge, precisely because we are involved in it: this risk is heavily reinforced by the vast expansion of the mass media. Although, on the one hand, the media increase information indefinitely, on the other, they seem to weaken our capacity for critical synthesis.

Today's Solemnity can offer us this perspective, based on the manifestation of a God who

revealed himself in history as the Light of the world to guide humanity and lead it at last into the Promised Land where freedom, justice and peace reign. And we see more and more clearly that on our own we cannot foster justice and peace unless the light of a God who shows us his Face is revealed to us, a God who appears to us in the manger of Bethlehem, who appears to us on the Cross.

Who then are the "Magi" of today, and what point has their "journey" and our "journey" reached? Dear brothers and sisters, let us return to that special moment of grace, the conclusion of the Second Vatican Council on 8 December 1965, when the Council Fathers addressed certain "Messages" to all humanity.

The first was addressed "To Rulers" and the second, "To Men of Thought and Science". These are two categories of people who, in a certain way, we can see portrayed in the evangelical figures of the Magi.

I would then like to add a third category, to which the Council did not address a message but which was very present in its attention in the conciliar Decree *Nostra Aetate*. I am referring to the spiritual leaders of the great non-Christian religions. Two thousand years later, we can thus recognize in the figures of the Magi a sort of prefiguration of these three constitutive dimensions of modern humanism: the political, scientific and religious dimensions.

The Epiphany shows them to us in a state of "pilgrimage", that is, in a movement of seeking, often somewhat confused, whose point of arrival, in short, is Christ, even if the star is sometimes hidden.

At the same time, the Epiphany shows to us God who in turn is on pilgrimage, a pilgrimage to man. There is not only the pilgrimage of man towards God; God himself has set out towards us: who is Jesus, in fact, if not God who has, so to speak, come out of himself to meet humanity? It was out of love that he made himself history in our history; out of love that he came to bring us the seed of new life (cf. *Jn* 3: 3-6) and sow it in the furrows of our earth so that it might sprout, flower and bear fruit.

Today, I would like to make my own those Messages of the Council which have lost nothing of their timeliness. For instance, one reads in the Message addressed to Rulers: "Your task is to be in the world the promoters of order and peace among men. But never forget this: It is God, the living and true God, who is the Father of men. And it is Christ, his eternal Son, who came to make this known to us and to teach us that we are all brothers. He it is who is the great artisan of order and peace on earth, for he it is who guides human history and who alone can incline hearts to renounce those evil passions which beget war and misfortune".

How can we fail to recognize in these words of the Council Fathers the luminous trail of a journey

which alone can transform the history of the nations and the world?

And further, in the "Message to Men of Thought and Science" we read: "Continue your search without tiring and without ever despairing of the truth", and this, in fact, is the great danger: losing interest in the truth and seeking only action, efficiency and pragmatism! "Recall the words of one of your great friends, St Augustine: 'Let us seek with the desire to find, and find with the desire to seek still more'. Happy are those who, while possessing the truth, search more earnestly for it in order to renew it, deepen it and transmit it to others. Happy also are those who, not having found it, are working toward it with a sincere heart. May they seek the light of tomorrow with the light of today until they reach the fullness of light".

This was said in these two Council Messages. Today, it is more necessary than ever to flank the leaders of nations and researchers and scientists with the leaders of the great non-Christian religious traditions, inviting them to face one another with the light of Christ, who came not to abolish but to bring to fulfilment what God's hand has written in the religious history of civilization, especially in the "great souls" who helped to build up humanity with their wisdom and example of virtue.

Christ is light, and light cannot darken but can only illuminate, brighten, reveal. No one, therefore, should be afraid of Christ and his message! And if, down through history, Christians as limited people and sinners have sometimes betrayed him by their behaviour, this makes it even clearer that the light is Christ and that the Church reflects it only by remaining united to him.

"We have seen his star in the East, and have come to adore the Lord" (Gospel acclamation, cf. *Mt* 2: 2).

What amazes us each time when we listen to these words of the Magi is that they prostrated themselves before a simple baby in his mother's arms, not in the setting of a royal palace but, on the contrary, in the poverty of a stable in Bethlehem (cf. *Mt* 2: 11).

How was this possible? What convinced the Magi that the Child was "the King of the Jews" and the King of the peoples? There is no doubt that they were persuaded by the sign of the star that they had seen "in its rising" and which had come to rest precisely over the place where the Child was found (cf. *Mt* 2: 9). But even the star would not have sufficed had the Magi not been people inwardly open to the truth.

In comparison with King Herod, beset with his interests of power and riches, the Magi were directed toward the goal of their quest and when they found it, although they were cultured men, they behaved like the shepherds of Bethlehem: they recognized the sign and adored the Child, offering him the precious and symbolic gifts that they had brought with them.

Dear brothers and sisters, let us too pause in spirit to contemplate the image of the adoration of the Magi. It contains a demanding and ever timely message. It is demanding and ever timely, first of all for the Church, which, reflected in Mary, is called to show to mankind Jesus, nothing but Jesus.

Indeed, he is the All and the Church exists solely to remain united to him and to make him known to the world. May the Mother of the Incarnate Word help us to be docile disciples of her Son, the Light of the nations!

The example of the Magi of that time is also an invitation to the Magi of today to open their minds and hearts to Christ and to offer him the gifts of their research. I would like to repeat to them, and to all the people of our time: do not be afraid of Christ's light! His light is the splendour of the truth. Let yourselves be enlightened by him, all peoples of the earth; let yourselves be enveloped by his love and you will find the way of peace. So may it be.

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