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The Epiphany of Our Lord

Text and audio recording of Saint Josemaria's homily, given on 6 January 1956, on the meaning of the feast of the Epiphany in the Church.

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Not too long ago I saw a marble bas-relief representing the adoration of the child Jesus by the Magi. The central figures were surrounded by four angels, each one bearing a symbol: a crown, an orb surmounted by the cross, a sword and a sceptre.

The artist had chosen symbols with which we are all familiar to illustrate the event we commemorate today. Some wise men whom tradition describes as kings come to pay homage to a child, after having been to Jerusalem to ask “Where is he that is born king of the Jews?”[1]

Moved by this question, I too now contemplate Jesus “lying in a manger,”[2] in a place fit only for animals. Lord, where is your kingship, your crown, your sword, your sceptre? They are his by right, but he does not want them. He reigns wrapped in swaddling clothes. Our king is unadorned. He comes to us as a defenceless little child. Can we help but recall the words of the Apostle: “He emptied himself, taking the nature of a slave”?[3]

Our Lord became man to teach us the Father’s will. And this he is already doing as he lies there in the

manger. Jesus Christ is seeking us — with a call which is a vocation to sanctity — so that we may carry out the redemption with him. Let us reflect on this first lesson of his. We are to co-redeem, by striving to triumph not over our neighbour, but over ourselves. Like Christ we need to empty ourselves, to consider ourselves as the servants of others, and so to bring them to God.

Where is the king? Could it be that Jesus wants to reign above all in men's hearts, in your heart? That is why he has become a child, for who can help loving a little baby? Where then is the king? Where is the Christ whom the Holy Spirit wants to fashion in our souls? He cannot be present in the pride that separates us from God, nor in the lack of charity which cuts us off from others. Christ cannot be there. In that loveless state man is left alone.

As you kneel at the feet of the child Jesus on the day of his Epiphany and see him a king bearing none of the outward signs of royalty, you can tell him: “Lord, take away my pride; crush my self-love, my desire to affirm myself and impose myself on others. Make the foundation of my personality my identification with you.”

The way of faith

We want to identify ourselves with Christ. It is not an easy goal. But it is not difficult either, if we live as our Lord has taught us to live, if we have recourse to his word every day, if we fill our lives with the sacramental reality, the Eucharist, which he has given us for our nourishment. Then the Christian's path proves to be viable. God has called us clearly and unmistakably. Like the Magi we have discovered a star: a light and a guide in the sky of our soul.

“We have seen his star in the East and have come to worship him.”^[4] We have had the same experience. We too noticed a new light shining in our soul and growing increasingly brighter. It was a desire to live a fully Christian life, a keenness to take God seriously. If each one of you were to tell aloud the intimate details of how his vocation made itself felt, the rest of us would conclude immediately that it was all God’s doing. Let us give thanks to God the Father, God the Son, God the Holy Spirit, and to Holy Mary, through whom all blessings from heaven come to us, for this gift which, along with our faith, is the greatest the Lord can bestow on any of his creatures. It is a clear desire to attain the fullness of charity, the conviction that sanctity is not only possible but necessary in the midst of our social and professional tasks.

Look how gently the Lord invites us. His words have human warmth; they

are the words of a person in love: “I have called you by your name. You are mine.”^[5] God, who is all beauty and greatness and wisdom, declares that we are his, that we have been chosen as the object of his infinite love. We need a strong life of faith to appreciate the wonder his providence has entrusted to us. A faith like that of the Magi, a conviction that neither the desert, nor the storms, nor the quiet of the oases will keep us from reaching our destination in the eternal Bethlehem: our definitive life with God.

A life of faith is a life of sacrifice. Our Christian vocation does not take us away from our place in the world, but it requires us to cast aside anything that would get in the way of God’s will. The light that has just begun to shine is only the beginning. We have to follow it if we want it to shine as a star, and then like the sun. St John Chrysostom writes: “While

the Magi were in Persia, they saw only a star. But when they left their homes behind, they saw the Sun of justice. We can say that they would not have continued to see the star if they had remained in their own country. Let us then hasten too; and even if everyone stands in our way, let us run to that child's home.”[6]

Firmness in your vocation

“‘We have seen his star in the East, and have come to adore him.’ When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled and all Jerusalem with him.”[7] This scene is still repeated today. Faced with the greatness of God or with a person who has made up his mind — with a decision both deeply human and profoundly Christian — to live up to the demands of his faith, there are people who find it strange and in their surprise they even get scandalized. It seems they are unable

to countenance a way of life which does not fit into their limited earthly horizons. They smirk at the generous actions of those who have heard God's call. They are frightened by such dedication, and in some cases that appear frankly pathological, they do all in their power to thwart the holy determination of those who with complete freedom have given themselves to God.

On some occasions I have witnessed what could be called a general mobilisation against those committed to dedicating their whole lives to the service of God and souls. Some people think that our Lord ought to ask their permission before choosing others for his service. Apparently they believe man is not free to say an unequivocal yes or no to this proposal of Love. To people who think that way, the supernatural life of each soul is something secondary. They do believe it has to be reckoned

with, but only after petty comforts and human selfishness have been accommodated. If this were the case, what would be left of Christianity? Are the loving but demanding words of Jesus only to be heard? Or are they rather to be heard and put into practice? Did he not say, “Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect”? [8]

Our Lord asks all men to come out to meet him, to become saints. He calls not only the Magi, the wise and powerful. Before that he had sent, not a star, but one of his angels to the shepherds in Bethlehem. [9] Rich or poor, wise or less so, all of us have to foster in our hearts a humble disposition that will allow us to listen to the word of God.

Take the case of Herod. He ranked among the powerful of this world and had the opportunity of availing himself of the help of the learned.

“And assembling all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born.”[10] His power and knowledge do not lead him to recognize God. In his hardened heart, power and knowledge are instruments for evil. His futile desire is to annihilate God, and he has only contempt for the life of innocent children.

Let us turn again to the Gospel. “They told him, In Bethlehem of Judah; for so it is written by the prophet: And you, O Bethlehem in the land of Judah, are by no means the least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who will govern my people Israel.”[11] We should not overlook these expressions of God’s mercy. He who was to redeem the world is born in an insignificant little village. And the reason is, as Scripture tells us again and again, that God is not a respecter

of persons.[12] When he invites a soul to live a life fully in accordance with the faith, he does not set store by merits of fortune, nobility, blood or learning. God's call precedes all merits. "The star which they had seen in the East went before them, till it came to rest where the child was." [13]

Vocation comes first. God loves us before we even know how to go toward him, and he places in us the love with which we can correspond to his call. God's fatherly goodness comes out to meet us.[14] Our Lord is not only just. He is much more: he is merciful. He does not wait for us to go to him. He takes the initiative, with the unmistakable signs of paternal affection.

A good shepherd and a good guide

If vocation comes first, if the star shines ahead to start us along the path of God's love, it is illogical that

we should begin to doubt if it chances to disappear from view. It might happen at certain moments in our interior life — and we are nearly always to blame — that the star disappears, just as it did to the wise kings on their journey. We have already realized the divine splendour of our vocation, and we are convinced about its definitive character, but perhaps the dust we stir up as we walk our miseries — forms an opaque cloud that cuts off the light from above.

What should we do if this happens? Follow the example of those wise men and ask. Herod made use of knowledge to act unjustly. The Magi use it to do good. But we Christians have no need to go to Herod nor to the wise men of this world. Christ has given his Church sureness in doctrine and a flow of grace in the sacraments. He has arranged things so that there will always be people to

guide and lead us, to remind us constantly of our way. There is an infinite treasure of knowledge available to us: the word of God kept safe by the Church, the grace of Christ administered in the sacraments and also the witness and example of those who live by our side and have known how to build with their good lives a road of faithfulness to God.

Allow me to give you a piece of advice. If ever you lose the clear light, always turn to the good shepherd. And who is the good shepherd? “He who enters by the door” of faithfulness to the Church’s doctrine and does not act like the hireling “who sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and flees”; whereupon “the wolf snatches them and scatters them.”^[15] Reflect on these divine words, which are not said in vain, and on the insistence of Christ who so affectionately speaks

of shepherds and sheep, of sheepfold and flock, as a practical proof of the need that our soul has of good guidance.

“If there be no bad shepherds,” says St Augustine speaking about the good shepherd, “he would not have described the hireling, who sees the wolf and flees. He seeks his own glory, not Christ’s glory. He does not dare to rebuke sinners with freedom of spirit. The wolf catches a sheep by the neck, the devil induces a man to commit adultery. And you are silent and do not rebuke. Then you are a hireling because you have seen the wolf and have fled. Perhaps you might say: No, I’m here, I haven’t fled. I answer: You have fled because you have been silent, and you have been silent because you were afraid.”[16]

The holiness of Christ’s Spouse has always been shown — as it can be

seen today — by the abundance of good shepherds. But our Christian faith, which teaches us to be simple, does not bid us be simple-minded. There are hirelings who keep silent, and there are hirelings who speak with words which are not those of Christ. That is why, if the Lord allows us to be left in the dark even in little things, if we feel that our faith is not firm, we should go to the good shepherd. He enters by the door as of right. He gives his life for others and wants to be in word and behaviour a soul in love. He may be a sinner too, but he trusts always in Christ's forgiveness and mercy.

If your conscience tells you that you have committed a fault — even though it does not appear to be serious or if you are in doubt — go to the sacrament of penance. Go to the priest who looks after you, who knows how to demand of you a steady faith, refinement of soul and

true Christian fortitude. The Church allows the greatest freedom for confessing to any priest, provided he has the proper faculties; but a conscientious Christian will go — with complete freedom — to the priest he knows is a good shepherd, who can help him to look up again and see once more, on high, the Lord's star.

Gold, incense and myrrh

Such was their sentiment that the Gospel almost repeats itself: “When they saw the star again they rejoiced with exceeding great joy.”^[17] Why were they so happy? Because those who never doubted receive proof from the Lord that the star had not disappeared. They had ceased to contemplate it visibly, but they had kept it always in their soul. Such is the Christian's vocation. If we do not lose faith, if we keep our hope in Jesus who will be with us “until the

consummation of the world,”[18] then the star reappears. And with this fresh proof that our vocation is real, we are conscious of a greater joy which increases our faith, hope and love.

“Going into the house they saw the child with Mary, his Mother, and they fell down and worshipped him.”[19] We also kneel down before Jesus, God hidden in humanity. We tell him once more that we do not want to turn our backs on his divine call, that we shall never separate ourselves from him, that we shall remove from our path all that may be an obstacle to our fidelity and that we sincerely wish to be docile to his inspirations. You, in your own heart, and I in mine — because I am praying intimately with deep silent cries — are telling the child Jesus that we desire to fulfil our duties as well as the servants of the parable, so that we too may hear

the response: “Well done, good and faithful servant.”[20]

“Then opening their treasures, they offered him gifts, of gold, frankincense and myrrh.”[21] Let us pause here a while to understand this passage of the holy Gospel. How is it possible that we, who are nothing and worth nothing, can make an offering to God? We read in the Scriptures: “Every good endowment and every perfect gift is from above.”[22] Man does not even manage to discover fully the depth and beauty of the Lord’s gifts. “If you knew the gift of God!”[23] Jesus exclaims to the Samaritan woman. Jesus has taught us to expect everything from the Father and to seek first of all the kingdom of God and his justice, and everything else will be given to us in addition, for he knows well what we need.[24]

In the economy of salvation our Father looks after each soul with loving care: “Each has his own special gift from God, one of one kind and one of another.”[25] It would, therefore, seem useless to be concerned about presenting to the Lord something that he has no need of. As debtors who have nothing with which to pay,[26] our gifts would be like those of the old law that are no longer acceptable to God: “Sacrifices and oblations and holocausts for sin you have not desired: neither are they pleasing to you.”[27]

But the Lord knows full well that giving is a vital need for those in love, and he himself points out what he desires from us. He does not care for riches, nor for the fruits or the beasts of the earth, nor for the sea or the air, because they all belong to him. He wants something intimate, which we have to give him freely: “My son, give me your heart.”[28] Do

you see? God is not satisfied with sharing. He wants it all. It's not our things he wants. It is ourselves. It is only when we give ourselves that we can offer other gifts to our Lord.

Let us give him gold. The precious gold we receive when in spirit we are detached from money and material goods. Let us not forget that these things are good, for they come from God. But the Lord has laid down that we should use them without allowing our hearts to become attached to them, putting them to good use for the benefit of all mankind.

Earthly goods are not bad, but they are debased when man sets them up as idols, when he adores them. They are ennobled when they are converted into instruments for good, for just and charitable Christian undertakings. We cannot seek after material goods as if they were a treasure. Our treasure is here, in a

manger. Our treasure is Christ and all our love and desire must be centred on him, “for where our treasure is, there will our hearts be also.”[29]

We offer frankincense that rises up to the Lord: our desire to live a noble life which gives off the “aroma of Christ.”[30] To impregnate our words and actions with his aroma is to sow understanding and friendship. We should accompany others so that no one is left, or can feel, abandoned. Our charity has to be affectionate, full of human warmth.

That is what Christ teaches us. Mankind awaited the coming of the Saviour for centuries. The prophets had announced his coming in a thousand ways. Even in the farthest corners of the earth, where a great part of God’s revelation to men was perhaps lost through sin or ignorance, the longing for God, the

desire to be redeemed, had been kept alive.

When the fullness of time comes, no philosophical genius, no Plato or Socrates appears to fulfil the mission of redemption. Nor does a powerful conqueror, another Alexander, take over the earth. Instead a child is born in Bethlehem. He it is who is to redeem the world. But before he speaks he loves with deeds. It is no magic formula he brings, because he knows that the salvation he offers must pass through human hearts. What does he first do? He laughs and cries and sleeps defenceless, as a baby, though he is God incarnate. And he does this so that we may fall in love with him, so that we may learn to take him in our arms.

We realize once again that this is what Christianity is all about. If a Christian does not love with deeds, he has failed as a Christian, besides

failing as a person. You cannot think of others as if they were digits, or rungs on a ladder on which you can rise, or a multitude to be harangued or humiliated, praised or despised, according to circumstances. Be mindful of what others are — and first of all those who are at your side: children of God, with all the dignity that marvellous title entails.

We have to behave as God's children toward all God's sons and daughters. Our love has to be a dedicated love, practised every day and made up of a thousand little details of understanding, hidden sacrifice and unnoticed self-giving. This is the "aroma of Christ" that made those who lived among our first brothers in the faith exclaim: See how they love one another!

The ideal is not out of reach. A Christian is no Tartarin of Tarascon, a literary character bent on hunting

lions in the corridors of his home, where they were not to be found. I always speak about real daily life, about the sanctification of work, of family bonds, of friendships. If we aren't Christian in these things, where will we be Christian? The pleasant smell of incense comes from some small, hidden grains of incense placed upon the burning charcoal. Likewise is the "aroma of Christ" noticed among men — not in a sudden burst of flame, but in the constant red-hot embers of virtues such as justice, loyalty, faithfulness, understanding, generosity and cheerfulness.

Together with the Magi we also offer myrrh, the spirit of sacrifice that can never be lacking in a Christian life. Myrrh reminds us of the passion of our Lord. On the cross he is offered wine mingled with myrrh.[31] And it was with myrrh that his body was anointed for burial.[32] But do not

think that to meditate on the need for sacrifice and mortification means to add a note of sadness to this joyful feast we celebrate today.

Mortification is not pessimism or bitterness. Mortification is useless without charity. That is why we must seek mortifications which, while helping us develop a proper dominion over the things of this earth, do not mortify those who live with us. A Christian has no warrant to act as torturer, nor should he allow himself to be treated as a feeble wretch. A Christian is a man who knows how to love with deeds and to prove his love on the touchstone of suffering.

But, I must remind you, mortification does not usually consist of great renunciations, for situations requiring great self-denial seldom occur. Mortification is made up of small conquests, such as smiling at

those who annoy us, denying the body some superfluous fancy, getting accustomed to listening to others, making full use of the time God allots us... and so many other details. We find it in the apparently trifling problems, difficulties and worries which arise without our looking for them in the course of each day.

Holy Mary, star of the East

I will finish repeating some words from today's Gospel: "Going into the house they saw the child with Mary, his Mother." Our Lady is always by her Son. The Magi are not received by a king on a high throne, but by a child in the arms of his Mother. Let us ask the Mother of God, who is our Mother, to prepare for us the way that leads to the fullness of love. *Cor Mariae dulcissimum, iter para tutum*: "Most Sweet Heart of Mary, prepare a safe way!" Her sweet heart knows the surest path for finding Christ.

The three kings had their star. We have Mary, Star of the Sea, Star of the East. We say to her today: Holy Mary, Star of the Sea, Morning Star, help your children. Our zeal for souls must know no frontiers, for no one is excluded from Christ's love. The three kings were the first among the gentiles to be called. But once the redemption had been accomplished, "there is neither male nor female" — there is no discrimination of any type — "for you are all one in Christ Jesus."[33]

We Christians cannot exclude anyone; we cannot segregate or classify souls. "Many will come from the East and West."[34] All find a place in Christ's heart. His arms, as we admire him again in the manger, are those of a child; but they are the same arms that will be extended on the cross drawing all men to himself. [35]

And a last thought for that just man, our father and lord St Joseph, who apparently has a very minor role in the Epiphany — as usual. I can imagine him recollected in prayer, lovingly protecting the Son of God made man who has been entrusted to his paternal care. With the marvellous refinement of one who does not live for himself, the holy patriarch spends himself in silent prayer and effective service.

We have talked today about practising a life of prayer and concern for apostolate. Who could be a better teacher for us than St Joseph? If you want my advice, which I have never tired of repeating these many years, *Ite ad Ioseph*: “Go to Joseph.”^[36] He will show us definite ways, both human and divine, to approach Jesus. And soon you will dare, as he did, “to take up in his arms, kiss, clothe and look after”^[37] this child God who has

been born unto us. As an homage of their veneration, the Magi offered gold, frankincense and myrrh to Jesus. Joseph gave his whole youthful and loving heart.

[1] Matt 2:2

[2] Luke 2:12

[3] Phil 2:7

[4] Matt 2:2

[5] Is 43:1

[6] *In Matthaeum homiliae*, 6,5 (PG 57,78)

[7] Matt 2:2-3

[8] Matt 5:48

[9] Cf Luke 2:9

[10] Matt 2:4

[11] Matt 2:5

[12] Cf 2 Chron 19:7; Rom 2:1; Eph 6:9; Col 3:25; etc

[13] Matt 2:9

[14] Ps 78:8

[15] Cf John 10:1-21

[16] *In Ioannis Evangelium tractatus*,
46,8 (PL 35,1732)

[17] Matt 2:10: *Videntes autem
stellam gavisii sunt gaudio magno
valde*

[18] Matt 28:20

[19] Matt 2:11

[20] Matt 25:23

[21] Matt 2:11

[22] Jas 1:17

[23] John 4:10

[24] Cf Matt 6:32-33

[25] 1 Cor 7:7

[26] Cf Matt 18:25

[27] Heb 10:8

[28] Prov 23:26

[29] Matt 6:21

[30] 2 Cor 2:15: *bonus odor Christi*

[31] Cf Mark 15:23

[32] Cf John 19:39

[33] Gal 3:28

[34] Matt 8:11

[35] Cf John 12:32

[36] Gen 41:55

[37] From the prayer to St Joseph as a preparation for holy Mass, found in the Roman Missal: *O felicem virum, beatum Ioseph, cui datum est Deum, quem multi reges voluerunt videre et non viderunt, audire et non audierunt, non solum videre et audire, sed portare, deosculari, vestire et custodire!*

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