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# Adoration of the Magi: Magisterium, Saints, Poets

Texts about the Wise Men's adoration of the Child in Bethlehem from the Magisterium of the Church, saints, and Christian poets, to help prepare for the feast of the Epiphany.

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## VOICE OF THE MAGISTERIUM

The arrival in Bethlehem of the Magi from the East to adore the newborn

Messiah is a sign of the manifestation of the universal King to the peoples and to all who seek the truth. It is the beginning of a movement opposed to that of Babel: from confusion to comprehension, from dispersion to reconciliation. Thus, we discern a link between Epiphany and Pentecost: if the Nativity of Christ, who is the Head, is also the Nativity of the Church, his Body, we can see the Magi as the peoples who join the remnant of Israel, foretelling the great sign of the "polyglot Church" that the Holy Spirit carried out 50 days after Easter. The faithful and tenacious love of God which is never lacking in his covenant from generation to generation is the "mystery" of which St Paul speaks in his Letters....

This "mystery" of God's fidelity constitutes the hope of history. It is of course opposed by the impulses of division and tyranny that wound

humanity due to sin and conflicts of selfishness...Indeed, God's Word revealed through the Prophet Isaiah still continues to apply: "darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples; but the Lord will arise upon you, and his glory will be seen upon you" (Is 60: 2). What the prophet proclaimed in Jerusalem was to be fulfilled in Christ's Church: "nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your rising" (Is 60: 3).

With Jesus Christ, Abraham's blessing was extended to all peoples, to the universal Church as the new Israel which welcomes within her the whole of humanity. Yet, what the prophet said is also true today in many senses: "thick darkness [covers] the peoples" and our history. Indeed, it cannot be said that "globalization" is synonymous with "world order" - it is quite the opposite. Conflicts for economic

supremacy and hoarding resources of energy, water and raw materials hinder the work of all who are striving at every level to build a just and supportive world. There is a need for greater hope, which will make it possible to prefer the common good of all to the luxury of the few and the poverty of the many. "This great hope can only be God... not any god, but the God who has a human face" (*Spe Salvi*, no. 31): the God who showed himself in the Child of Bethlehem and the Crucified and Risen One.

*from Benedict XVI, Homily, January 6, 2008*

## **VOICE OF THE SAINTS**

*from St. Leo the Great, Homily 3 on the Epiphany (5th c.):*

Dear friends, now that we have received instruction in this revelation of God's grace, let us

celebrate with spiritual joy the day of our first harvesting, of the first calling of the Gentiles. Let us give thanks to the merciful God, who has made us worthy, in the words of the Apostle, to share the position of the saints in light, who has rescued us from the power of darkness, and brought us into the kingdom of his beloved Son. As Isaiah prophesied: the people of the Gentiles, who sat in darkness, have seen a great light, and for those who dwelt in the region of the shadow of death a light has dawned. He spoke of them to the Lord: The Gentiles, who do not know you, will invoke you, and the peoples, who knew you not, will take refuge in you.

This is the day that Abraham saw, and rejoiced to see, when he knew that the sons born of his faith would be blessed in his seed, that is, in Christ. Believing that he would be the father of the nations, he looked into

the future, giving glory to God, in full awareness that God is able to do what he has promised.

This is the day that David prophesied in the psalms, when he said: All the nations that you have brought into being will come and fall down in adoration in your presence, Lord, and glorify your name. Again, the Lord has made known his salvation; in the sight of the nations he has revealed his justice.

This came to be fulfilled, as we know, from the time when the star beckoned the three wise men out of their distant country and led them to recognise and adore the King of heaven and earth. The obedience of the star calls us to imitate its humble service: to be servants, as best we can, of the grace that invites all men to find Christ.

*from St. John Chrysostom, Homily 6  
on the Gospel of Matthew (4th c):*

For if you can learn what the star was, and of what kind, and whether it were one of the common stars, or new and unlike the rest, and whether it was a star by nature or a star in appearance only, we shall easily know the other things also. Whence then will these points be manifest? From the very things that are written. Thus, that this star was not of the common sort, or rather not a star at all, as it seems at least to me, but some invisible power transformed into this appearance, is in the first place evident from its very course. For there is not, there is not any star that moves by this way, but whether it be the sun you mention, or the moon, or all the other stars, we see them going from east to west; but this moved from north to south; for so is Palestine situated with respect to Persia.

In the second place, one may see this from the time also. For it appears not

in the night, but in mid-day, while the sun is shining; and this is not within the power of a star, nay not of the moon; for the moon that so much surpasses all, when the beams of the sun appear, straightway hides herself, and vanishes away. But this by the excess of its own splendor overcame even the beams of the sun, appearing brighter than they, and in so much light shining out more illustriously.

In the third place, from its appearing, and hiding itself again. For on their way as far as Palestine it appeared leading them, but after they set foot within Jerusalem, it hid itself: then again, when they had left Herod, having told him on what account they came, and were on the point of departing, it shows itself; all which is not like the motion of a star, but of some power highly endued with reason. For it had not even any course at all of its own, but when



they were to move, it moved; when to stand, it stood, dispensing all as need required: in the same kind of way as the pillar of the cloud, now halting and now rousing up the camp of the Jews, when it was needful.

In the fourth place, one may perceive this clearly, from its mode of pointing Him out...How then, tell me, did the star point out a spot so confined, just the space of a manger and shed, unless it left that height and came down, and stood over the very head of the young child? And at this the evangelist was hinting when he said, "Lo, the star went before them, till it came and stood over where the young Child was."

*from St. Josemaria, "Christ Is Passing By," nos. 35-37:*

"Then opening their treasures, they offered him gifts, of gold, frankincense and myrrh" (Mt 2:11).  
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? ...

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" (Prov 22:26). 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 centered on him...

We offer frankincense that rises up to the Lord: our desire to live a noble life which gives off the "aroma of Christ." 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 Jesus 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....

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. And it was with myrrh that his body was anointed for burial. 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 is a person who knows how to love with deeds and to prove his love on the touchstone of suffering.

## **VOICE OF THE POETS**

### *The Epiphany*

“Lord Babe, if Thou art He

We sought for patiently,

Where is Thy court?

Hither may prophecy and star resort;

Men heed not their report.” —

“Bow down and worship, righteous man:

This Infant of a span

Is He man sought for since the world  
began!" —

“Then, Lord, accept my gold, too base  
a thing

For Thee, of all kings King.”

“Lord Babe, despite Thy youth

I hold Thee of a truth

Both Good and Great:

But wherefore dost Thou keep so  
mean a state,

Low-lying desolate?" —

“Bow down and worship, righteous  
seer:

The Lord our God is here

Approachable, Who bids us all draw  
near." —

“Wherefore to Thee I offer  
frankincense,

Thou Sole Omnipotence."

"But I have only brought

Myrrh; no wise afterthought

Instructed me

To gather pearls or gems, or choice to  
see

Coral or ivory." —

"Not least thine offering proves thee  
wise:

For myrrh means sacrifice,

And He that lives, this Same is He  
that dies." —

"Then here is myrrh: alas, yea woe is  
me

That myrrh befitteth Thee."

Myrrh, frankincense, and gold:

And lo from wintry fold



Good-will doth bring

A Lamb, the innocent likeness of this  
King

Whom stars and seraphs sing:

And lo the bird of love, a Dove,

Flutters and coos above:

And Dove and Lamb and Babe agree  
in love: —

Come all mankind, come all creation  
hither,

Come, worship Christ together.

*by Christina Rossetti (before 1886)*

### **A Child My Choice**

*by Robert Southwell (1560-1595)*

Let folly praise that fancy loves, I  
praise and love that Child

Whose heart no thought, whose  
tongue no word, whose hand no deed  
defiled.

I praise Him most, I love Him best, all  
praise and love is His;

While Him I love, in Him I live, and  
cannot live amiss.

Love's sweetest mark, laud's highest  
theme, man's most desired light,

To love Him life, to leave Him death,  
to live in Him delight.

He mine by gift, I His by debt, thus  
each to other due;

First friend He was, best friend He is,  
all times will try Him true.

Though young, yet wise; though  
small, yet strong; though man, yet  
God He is:

As wise, He knows; as strong, He can;  
as God, He loves to bless.

His knowledge rules, His strength  
defends, His love doth cherish all;

His birth our joy, His life our light,  
His death our end of thrall.

Alas! He weeps, He sighs, He pants,  
yet do His angels sing;

Out of His tears, His sighs and throbs,  
doth bud a joyful spring.

Almighty Babe, whose tender arms  
can force all foes to fly,

Correct my faults, protect my life,  
direct me when I die!

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