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Come, let us adore!

During Christmastime, the astonishing events at Bethlehem inspire us to reconsider our deepest motivations. Jesus, Mary, and Joseph invite us to worship the Baby Jesus, who is helpless and in need of our care.

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When football fans enter the stadium in Liverpool, they are greeted by a large sculpture of two soldiers, each in a different uniform, shaking hands over a soccer ball. The scene

represents an event that occurred during the First World War, known as the “Christmas Truce.” It is said that on Christmas Eve in 1914, a spontaneous ceasefire occurred in the trenches separating the two armies. One side signalled to the other, inviting them to enjoy a night of peace on the commemoration of Jesus’ birth. The initiative was well-received, and soldiers from both sides gathered, exchanged simple gifts, sang carols, took group photos, and even played a football match.

One of the carols that everyone remembers hearing or singing that night is the famous “Adeste Fideles,” an 18th-century composition apparently by an English musician. The fact that the original song was in Latin made it possible for people who did not share a language to sing it together, accompanied by some bagpipes. This carol, now known worldwide, invites those who sing

and listen to join the group that goes to Bethlehem — shepherds, angels, and magi — to worship the newborn Jesus. “Christmas. The carols sing *Venite, venite*, “O come ye, O come ye.” Let us go to him. He has just been born. After contemplating how Mary and Joseph care for the Child, I now dare to hint to you: Look at him again, gaze at him without ceasing.”[1]

What we adore

The invitation to worship, to assume an attitude of humility and total submission to another person — especially when that person is a Child who can barely speak — has become, for many people, something strange or even problematic. As personal autonomy is presented as the supreme right and moral value, putting our lives in the hands of another person may appear to be a

sign of weakness or superstition, perhaps a relic of the past.

In reality, only God is worthy of worship: only to Him is the utmost reverence due. But worship is somehow a reality inherent to every human being, whether or not they have faith: each of us establishes something or someone as the ultimate reason for all the other things we do. “What is a ‘god’ on the existential plane?” Pope Francis asked. “It is what is at the centre of one’s life and on whom one’s actions and thoughts depend. One can grow up in a family that is Christian in name but that is actually centred on reference points that are foreign to the Gospel. Human beings cannot live without being centred on something. And so the world offers the ‘supermarket’ of idols, which can be objects, images, ideas and roles.”[2]

From this perspective, both believers and those who see worship as a thing of the past can rediscover something of the path that leads to Bethlehem. To embark on it, we might start by asking ourselves: “What is the reason I am doing what I am doing? What moves me to do this and not something else?” When we reflect in this way, we will identify initial motivations, and then, behind them, pulling the thread, we will discover other, less obvious, motivations. And even these more subtle motivations may, in turn, lead to deeper ones. It is therefore necessary to keep asking until we reach our ultimate criterion of action; what we consider non-negotiable, untouchable, and that guides our decisions: what, ultimately, we worship because we subject everything else to it.

We may then be surprised to discover that, more or less frequently, our decisions do not point

so much to the God we profess but perhaps to other undisclosed purposes, such as personal prestige, material security, the preservation of a specific situation, or simple comfort. All of this may even be mixed with elements partly related to faith, such as the search for spiritual peace or the tranquillity that comes from doing what one believes one should do. But perhaps, in the end, even these motives keep us away from the elation that this Child who is God has brought into the world.

The invitation we sing over and over during Christmastime — “Come, let us adore!” — leads us to question ourselves about what we live for. Come, everyone, and let yourselves be challenged by the paradox of seeing the One who made heaven and earth as an infant. Come, contemplate how the One who created everything with his Word

cannot speak a word Himself. “I am deeply moved by the Jesus born in Bethlehem,” St. Josemaria confessed: “A defenceless, powerless child, incapable of offering any resistance. God gives himself up to men.”[3] During Christmastime, the astonishing events at Bethlehem inspire us to reconsider our deepest motivations. Jesus, Mary, and Joseph — and with them, all the saints — invite us to question our sources of security, the great or small things we adore, in order to turn our hearts toward the only star that indicates where the Saviour lies.

Following the star with a sincere heart

After Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the east came to Jerusalem, saying, 'Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we saw his star when it rose in the

east and have come to worship him' (*Mt* 2:1-2). The magi join in that *venite, adoremus*. They have left the certainties of the known to seek the source of their thirst for worship. Although they sense the centre of gravity guiding their decisions throughout their lives, they had never before managed to grasp it clearly. Now, arriving in Bethlehem, their hearts beat faster, and they realise that they are close to discovering what they were missing. Saint Josemaría recognized in the magi's search the experience of the Christian vocation: the recognition of a longing that can only be fulfilled by God, the discovery of what truly deserves to be worshipped. Like them, we "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."[4]

Benedict XVI called them “men with restless hearts.”[5] This is the unfailing characteristic of any soul that seeks Christ amid the fragility of this world. The magi’s hearts, like ours, harbor a longing like the psalmist’s: *O God, you are my God; earnestly I seek you; my soul thirsts for you; my flesh faints for you, as in a dry and weary land where there is no water* (*Ps* 63:2). This is the cry of the pilgrim, very different from a wanderer who does not know what he wants or where he is going. The pilgrim is a seeker, desirous of loving God more, from morning to night. *In bed, I remember you; in the watches of the night, I meditate on you* (*Ps* 63:7). This desire for the true God is inscribed in all men and women on earth, Christians and non-Christians alike, and it is what keeps both on the journey. For this reason,in the fourth Eucharistic prayer, when the priest asks God the Father to remember those for whom the

sacrifice of Christ is offered, he includes “all who seek [God] with a sincere heart.”[6]

The magi, explains Benedict XVI, “were no doubt learned men, quite knowledgeable about the heavens and probably possessed of a fine philosophical formation. But they desired more than simply knowledge about things. They wanted above all else to know what is essential. They wanted to know how we succeed in being human. And therefore they wanted to know if God exists, and where and how he exists. Whether he is concerned about us and how we can encounter him. Nor did they want just to know. They wanted to understand the truth about ourselves and about God and the world. Their outward pilgrimage was an expression of their inward journey, the inner pilgrimage of their hearts. They were men who sought God and

were ultimately on the way towards him. They were seekers after God."[7]

Following the star of Bethlehem is a lifelong task. The task of seeking the manger hidden in ordinary life might, at times, seem tiresome, because it means not stopping in rooms that seem comfortable, but in which Jesus does not abide. But the goal is worth the struggle: *And when they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. And going into the house, they saw the child with Mary, his mother, and they fell down and worshipped him. Then, opening their treasures, they offered him gifts, gold, frankincense, and myrrh* (*Mt* 2:10-11). The lives of those wise men changed forever that day. Ultimately, "everything depends on whether there is or is not worship in our lives. Whenever we worship, something happens in us and around us. Things straighten out again. We enter into the truth. Our gaze sharpens. Many

things that overwhelmed us disappear."[8]

Letting God be God

Throughout the journey, we will not only encounter the star that guides us to Jesus but also countless artificial lights, substitutes that seek to deceive us, claim our worship, and imprison our freedom. They are the false idols of which the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* speaks: "Idolatry not only refers to false pagan worship. It remains a constant temptation to faith. Idolatry consists in divinizing what is not God."[9] Everyone, including Christians, can fall into idolatry over and over again, every time we place something or someone, at least partially, in God's place. These false idols then become "forms of oppression and of apparent freedoms that in reality are only chains that enslave."[10] The process of displacing God does not occur

conspicuously and scandalously; it sneaks into our hearts quietly, like ivy gradually infiltrating a wall until it threatens to collapse.

Every morning when he woke, Saint Josemaría knelt down and repeated the word *serviam!* — "I will serve!" Many people learned this gesture from him, expressing through it a renewed desire not to be distracted by false adorations; to bow down before God alone. It is a gesture of worship, and therefore, a gesture of freedom, a gesture that frees us from the possibility of stopping at small idols, even when they are disguised with good appearances or intentions. "Worship is freedom that comes from the roots of true freedom: from freedom from oneself. Therefore, it is 'salvation,' 'happiness,' or, as John calls it, 'joy.' And at the same time, total availability, surrender, and service, as God wants me."[11]

Saint Josemaría also repeated this petition from the psalmist every day in his thanksgiving after celebrating the Eucharist: *Non nobis, Domine, non nobis; sed nomini tuo da gloriam!* ("Not unto us, O Lord, not unto us, but to your name give glory!") We would diminish this prayer if we thought that it was merely an expression of renouncing glory in general, as if it were something bad for us. On the contrary, Christians hope in the promise of living in the glory of God. Rather than renouncing glory, we "resize" it: the psalmist's request assumes that human glory, without the glory of God, is always too small, like any idol compared to God. Mere human glory eventually reveals itself as a sad caricature: the craving to be primarily pleased with our achievements or to receive the admiration of others, the self-satisfaction of human glory, is quite trivial… because God is not there.

The Child Jesus, helpless and in need of everything, comes to unmask all our idols, which do not see, hear, or speak (cf. *Ps* 115:5-6). Christmastime is an invitation to once again undertake the journey towards that improvised but luminous, warm home, which is the cave at Bethlehem. There, we will marvel at the "the freedom of a God who, out of pure love, decides to abase himself by taking on flesh like ours."[12]

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[1] Saint Josemaría, *The Forge*, no. 549.

[2] Pope Francis, General Audience, 1-VIII-2018.

[3] Saint Josemaría, Christ is Passing By, no. 113.

[4] Ibid, no. 32.

[5] Pope Benedict XVI, Homily on the Epiphany of the Lord, 6-I-2013.

[6] Roman Missal, Eucharistic Prayer IV.

[7] Pope Benedict XVI, Homily on the Epiphany of the Lord, 6-I-2013.

[8] R. Guardini, *The Lord*, 30.

[9] *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 2113.

[10] Msgr. Fernando Ocáriz, Pastoral Letter, 9-I-2018, no. 1.

[11] J. Ratzinger, "Hacer oración en nuestro tiempo," en *Palabra en la Iglesia*, Salamanca, Sígueme, 1976, pg. 107 (our translation).

[12] Msgr. Fernando Ocáriz, Pastoral Letter, 9-I-2018, no. 1.

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