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**From the Selected Works of Reverend Lawrence E. Frizzell, D.Phil.**

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## Gratitude for God's Gift

Reverend Lawrence E. Frizzell, D.Phil., *Seton Hall University*



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## **The Epiphany**

Sunday Readings for January 6, 2013 for Cycle C:

Is 60:1-6; Ps 72; Eph 3:2-6; Mt 2:1-12

### **GRATITUDE FOR GOD'S GIFT**

*Lawrence E. Frizzell*

The public worship of the Church responds to a number of profound human needs, especially serving to draw the faithful into intimacy with God through the drama that re-presents the work of Christ. It also contains all the elements for the continuing instruction that we all require for spiritual growth. "For in the liturgy God speaks to his people and Christ is still proclaiming his Gospel" (Vatican II, *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* #33).

The Christmas season, like the Easter-Pentecost cycle, offers a treasury of doctrine for the faithful in a form attractive to the human spirit. "In revealing the Father's love and the sublime call of every human being, Jesus made use of the most ordinary realities of social life and illustrated his teachings with expressions and teachings from everyday life" (Vatican II, *The Church in the Modern World* #32). This is just as true for the narratives *about* Jesus as for the Church's recollection and presentation of his teachings.

With this in mind we focus our attention on the Church's celebration of the manifestation (epiphany) of Jesus. Few symbolic expressions of a human relationship are more universal than gift-giving. Who does not appreciate the sign of thoughtfulness and love represented by a gift? The feast of Christ's birth draws a great variety of people to our places of worship. Few can remain oblivious to the celebration of God's great gift to the world. Set within the history of Israel, the Nativity is best appreciated by recalling echoes and signs of God's loving care of his people over the centuries. These experiences of rescue and redemption became the basis for prophetic message of hope for the future. During and after the Babylonian Exile (586-539 BC) teachers inspired by the message of Isaiah, the great prophet of Jerusalem in the eighth century, told the people about a renewal of Jewish life in Jerusalem. The presence of God would illuminate the city again so that her brilliance would draw the nations to worship the one God. The kings and ordinary folk would see how to walk in the path to happiness and, in gratitude, would bring the treasures of the earth to Jerusalem. "All from Sheba (perhaps the modern Yemen) shall come bearing gold and frankincense, and proclaiming the praises of the LORD" (Isa 60:6). Such gifts would enhance the splendor of the Temple and be integrated into sacrificial worship (60:7), as the prophet Haggai promised those who returned to Jerusalem (2:7-8). What greater honor could be given to human art and industry than to contribute the rare products of the earth and its plants to the worship of the one God?

During the Exile the teachers in the "school of Isaiah" boldly proclaimed that idolatry was folly, not only for Jews but for Gentiles as well. Usually idolatry is self-serving for the ruler of a given state, whether in crude forms of ancient times or the modern declarations that the state itself is

absolute. As Hitler and Stalin would now have to acknowledge about God, "the people or kingdom shall perish that does not serve you..." (Isa 60:12) Matthew knew well that Herod the Great was a paranoid megalomaniac; the frenzy described after the query of the magi follows the pattern of his fears. As a man whose father was a convert to Judaism, he was not very knowledgeable about its teachings. So he consulted the priests and others learned in the Scriptures. How the people must have awaited a king of the Davidic dynasty! Isaiah had emphasized that God's redemptive plan would be accomplished through a descendant of David (9:6; 11:1-12) and Micah pointed to Bethlehem as the birthplace of this great shepherd (5:1). Herod feigns piety to trick the magi, but when that failed he lashed out in fury against anyone who might be a candidate for the title "King of the Jews." How often in history have the innocent fallen prey to irrational fears of those in power!