Gifts and Their Responsible Use

Lawrence E. Frizzell, Seton Hall University
Gifts and Their Responsible Use

Reverend Lawrence E. Frizzell
Institute of Judaeo-Christian Studies
Seton Hall University
South Orange, NJ

This article was previously published in The Catholic Advocate.


**Feast of the Epiphany**
Sunday Readings for January 5, 2014 for Cycle A:
Is 60:1-6; Ps 72; Eph 3:2-6; Mt 2:1-12

**GIFTS AND THEIR RESPONSIBLE USE**

*Lawrence E. Frizzell*

The Epiphany or manifestation of Jesus to the world took place gradually, a fact that is recognized in the Liturgy of this feast. The Baptism of Jesus and his first sign at Cana are commemorated as the beginning of his teaching and redeeming ministry, foreshadowed by the coming of the magi during his infancy.

The Gospel according to St. Matthew (2:1-12) is the source of the familiar story of wise men who sought the new-born King of the Jews. Along with the names of four Gentile women in the genealogy of Jesus (1:1-17), we see here an anticipation of his universal mission. Probably the evangelist points back to psalmists and prophets who proclaim that all peoples must acknowledge God and accept his Anointed as their king. "Nations shall walk in your light, and kings by your shining radiance" (Is 60:3; see Ps 72 from which the congregation's response to the Isaiah passage is taken).

The term "magi" or wise men is now sometimes translated "astrologers" because they followed a star. However, in ancient times there was no clear distinction between astrology and astronomy, nor would the latter be used to discredit the former. For millennia in the Middle East and beyond people had been fascinated by stars and planets and they charted their paths. Although every civilization built its legal system on the implicit recognition of human free will and responsibility, individuals and nations often felt that their destiny was beyond their control. Or were they merely curious about their future while trying to find a substitute for the challenging burden of personal responsibility?

The biblical heritage stresses that meaning in life is grounded on knowing the divine will and responding to it, as a subject obeys a king. This view is balanced by the doctrine that every human being is created in the divine image and likeness (Gn 1:26-28). Thus all are children of God, sharing to some extent in the royal function of governing creation.

The magi, like most people, were fascinated by the wonders of nature; however, they were wise, so they realized that even the most marvelous creatures only reflect aspects of the mystery of God. They knew that the mysterious star pointed beyond itself.

Like Moses when he experienced the burning bush (Ex 3:1-6), the magi discover that the natural phenomenon can be fully understood only in light of God's Word. The star leads them, not directly to Jesus, but to Jerusalem. There the Word of God is interpreted for them by "all the chief priests and scribes of the people" (Mt 2:4).
We must use our intelligence and knowledge of God's world to understand our human vocation as steward and caretaker of creation. But it is so easy to be led astray by false light! So we consult the Word of God as interpreted by the community of faith under its lawful teachers. Few of us have precious material gifts to offer, and we know that their value lies only in their symbolism. A far richer treasure is constituted by the talents and time each person possesses. Brought to maturity through responsible activity rooted in prayer and study, we not only offer a unique gift to God the Father through Christ, but we also manifest something of his light to our world.