



# The Holy See

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«CAPPELLA PAPAIE» ON THE SOLEMNITY OF THE EPIPHANY

## **HOMILY OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI**

*Vatican Basilica*

*Friday, 6 January 2006*

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

The light that shone in the night at Christmas illuminating the Bethlehem Grotto, where Mary, Joseph and the shepherds remained in silent adoration, shines out today and is manifested to all. The Epiphany is a mystery of light, symbolically suggested by the star that guided the Magi on their journey. The true source of light, however, the "sun that rises from on high" (cf. Lk 1: 78), is Christ.

In the mystery of Christmas, Christ's light shines on the earth, spreading, as it were, in concentric circles. First of all, it shines on the Holy Family of Nazareth: the Virgin Mary and Joseph are illuminated by the divine presence of the Infant Jesus. The light of the Redeemer is then manifested to the shepherds of Bethlehem, who, informed by an Angel, hasten immediately to the grotto and find there the "sign" that had been foretold to them: the Child, wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger (cf. Lk 2: 12).

The shepherds, together with Mary and Joseph, represent that "remnant of Israel", the poor, the *anawim*, to whom the Good News was proclaimed.

Finally, Christ's brightness shines out, reaching the Magi who are the first-fruits of the pagan peoples.

The palaces of the rulers of Jerusalem, to which, paradoxically, the Magi actually take the news of the Messiah's birth, are left in the shade. Moreover, this news does not give rise to joy but to fear and hostile reactions. The divine plan was mysterious: "The light came into the world, but men

loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were wicked" (*Jn* 3: 19).

But what is this light? Is it merely an evocative metaphor or does this image correspond to reality? The Apostle John writes in his First Letter: "God is light; in him there is no darkness" (*I Jn* 1: 5); and further on he adds: "God is love". These two affirmations, taken together, help us to understand better: the light that shone forth at Christmas, which is manifested to the peoples today, is God's love revealed in the Person of the Incarnate Word. Attracted by this light, the Magi arrived from the East.

In the mystery of the Epiphany, therefore, alongside an expanding outward movement, a movement of attraction toward the centre is expressed which brings to completion the movement already written in the Old Covenant. The source of this dynamism is God, One in Three Persons, who draws all things and all people to himself. The Incarnate Person of the Word is presented in this way as the beginning of universal reconciliation and recapitulation (cf. *Eph* 1: 9-10).

He is the ultimate destination of history, the point of arrival of an "exodus", of a providential journey of redemption that culminates in his death and Resurrection. Therefore, on the Solemnity of the Epiphany, the liturgy foresees the so-called "Announcement of Easter": indeed, the liturgical year sums up the entire parable of the history of salvation, whose centre is "the Triduum of the Crucified Lord, buried and risen".

In the liturgy of the Christmas season this verse of Psalm 98[97] frequently recurs as a refrain: "The Lord has made his salvation known: in the sight of the nations he has revealed his justice" (v. 2).

These are words that the Church uses to emphasize the "epiphanic" dimension of the Incarnation: the Son of God becoming human, his entry into history, is the crowning point of God's revelation of himself to Israel and to all the peoples. In the Child of Bethlehem, God revealed himself in the humility of the "human form", in the "form of a slave", indeed, of one who died on a cross (cf. *Phil* 2: 6-8). This is the Christian paradox.

Indeed, this very concealment constitutes the most eloquent "manifestation" of God. The humility, poverty, even the ignominy of the Passion enable us to know what God is truly like. The Face of the Son faithfully reveals that of the Father. This is why the mystery of Christmas is, so to speak, an entire "epiphany". The manifestation to the Magi does not add something foreign to God's design but unveils a perennial and constitutive dimension of it, namely, that "in Christ Jesus the Gentiles are now coheirs... members of the same body and sharers of the promise through... the Gospel" (*Eph* 3: 6).

At a superficial glance, God's faithfulness to Israel and his manifestation to the peoples could seem divergent aspects; they are actually two sides of the same coin. In fact, according to the

Scriptures, it is precisely by remaining faithful to his Covenant of love with the people of Israel that God also reveals his glory to other peoples. Grace and fidelity (cf. *Ps* 89[88]: 2), "mercy and truth" (cf. *Ps* 85[84]: 11), are the content of God's glory, they are his "name", destined to be known and sanctified by people of every language and nation.

However, this "content" is inseparable from the "method" that God chose to reveal himself, that is, absolute fidelity to the Covenant that reaches its culmination in Christ. The Lord Jesus, at the same time and inseparably, is "a light revealing to the Gentiles the glory of your people Israel" (Lk 2: 32), as the elderly Simeon was to exclaim, inspired by God, taking the Child in his arms when his parents presented him at the temple. The light that enlightens the peoples - the light of the Epiphany - shines out from the glory of Israel - the glory of the Messiah born, in accordance with the Scriptures, in Bethlehem, "the city of David" (cf. *Lk* 2: 4).

The Magi worshipped a simple Child in the arms of his Mother Mary, because in him they recognized the source of the twofold light that had guided them: the light of the star and the light of the Scriptures. In him they recognized the King of the Jews, the glory of Israel, but also the King of all the peoples.

The mystery of the Church and her missionary dimension are also revealed in the liturgical context of the Epiphany. She is called to make Christ's light shine in the world, reflecting it in herself as the moon reflects the light of the sun.

The ancient prophecies concerning the holy city of Jerusalem, such as the marvellous one in Isaiah that we have just heard: "Rise up in splendour! Your light has come.... Nations shall walk by your light, and kings by your shining radiance" (*Is* 60: 1-3), have found fulfilment in the Church.

This is what disciples of Christ must do: trained by him to live in the way of the Beatitudes, they must attract all people to God through a witness of love: "In the same way, your light must shine before men so that they may see goodness in your deeds and give praise to your heavenly Father" (*Mt* 5: 16). By listening to Jesus' words, we members of the Church cannot but become aware of the total inadequacy of our human condition, marked by sin.

The Church is holy, but made up of men and women with their limitations and errors. It is Christ, Christ alone, who in giving us the Holy Spirit is able to transform our misery and constantly renew us. He is the light of the peoples, the *lumen gentium*, who has chosen to illumine the world through his Church (cf. *Lumen Gentium*, n. 1).

"How can this come about?", we also ask ourselves with the words that the Virgin addresses to the Archangel Gabriel. And she herself, the Mother of Christ and of the Church, gives us the answer: with her example of total availability to God's will - "*fiat mihi secundum verbum tuum*" (*Lk* 1: 38) - she teaches us to be a "manifestation" of the Lord, opening our hearts to the power of

grace and faithfully abiding by the words of her Son, light of the world and the ultimate end of history.

So be it!

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