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EPIPHANY

Homily of the Right Reverend Dom Jean PATEAU
Abbot of Our Lady of Fontgombault
(Fontgombault, January 6th, 2024)

Et procidentēs adoraverunt eum.
And falling down they adored Him.
(Mt 2:11)

Dear Brothers and Sisters,
My dearly beloved Sons,

AFTER YOU CROSSED the gate of the church, you may have remarked, if you stopped a few moments before the crib, that the Child Jesus placed there had been changed. The slumbering child wrapped in swaddling clothes has been replaced by a smiling child extending His arms. The Church celebrates today the mystery of the Epiphany. This Greek word means “manifestation”, or “apparition”. In the Eastern Churches, this feast is called “Theophany”, the manifestation of God.

Already during Christmas night, the shepherds, instructed by the angels, had come to adore the Divine Child in the crib. Today, the Lord manifests Himself to the Gentiles through the three Wise Men. A star has led them towards Judaea.

Thus is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah, recalled in the reading:

Arise, be enlightened, O Jerusalem! [...] The Lord shall arise upon thee, and His glory shall be seen upon thee. And the Gentiles shall walk in thy light, and kings in the brightness

a. *Is* 60:1-4. of thy rising. Lift up thy eyes round about, and see: all these are gathered together, they are come to thee: thy sons shall come from afar, and thy daughters shall rise up at thy side. ^a

The Wise Men therefore enter the house where the Child and Mary His Mother are. They had revealed by a question to Herod the reason why they had come:

b. *Mt* 2:2. Where is He that is born king of the Jews? For we have seen His star in the East, and are come to adore Him. ^b

The Wise Men thus enrol on the long list of those seeking God. The Lord didn't fail to give them the signs necessary for them to be able to fulfil their quest. The Vatican II Council will sum up this divine mercy in a formula full of light and hope:

c. Pastoral Const.
Gaudium et spes,
n. 22. Since Christ died for all men, and since the ultimate vocation of man is in fact one, and divine, we ought to believe that the Holy Spirit in a manner known only to God offers to every man the possibility of being associated with this Paschal mystery. ^c

If the liturgy of the Mass focuses on the coming of the Wise Men, the divine office broadens the outlook, especially in this antiphon:

d. Second Vespers,
Magnificat. This day we keep a holiday in honour of three wonders: this day a star led the Wise Men to the manger; this day at the marriage, water was made wine; this day was Christ, for our salvation, pleased to be baptized of John in Jordan. Alleluia. ^d

The Lord's baptism in Jordan and the miracle at the Cana wedding will be contemplated respectively in the Octave Mass and in the second Sunday after Epiphany Mass.

e. *Jn* 1:29. On the bank of Jordan, John the Baptist points out Jesus: "Behold the Lamb of God, behold Him who taketh away the sin of the world." ^e He gives testimony to a sign: "I saw the Spirit coming down, as a dove from heaven; and He remained upon Him." ^f St. Matthew adds that a voice was heard: "This is My beloved Son, in Whom I am well pleased." ^g

f. *Ibid.*, v. 32.
g. *Mt* 3:17. In Cana, water changed into wine heralds the coming of a new era, in which grace will flow abundantly. This first sign leads the disciples to believe.

But today's gospel invites us to go further. The Wise Men go back to their country by another way. Materially speaking, there's no doubt about that. To go back, they don't take the way going through Jerusalem, so as to avoid encountering the umbrageous Herod. But it is especially from an inner and spiritual point of view that the Wise Men have been transformed. Their hearts were worried, maybe at times doubtful; now they are joyful and thankful that they could encounter the Child in the crib and adore Him. As they came to Bethlehem, "the House of Bread," they encountered the Emmanuel, "God with us." God made Himself a food for them.

Couldn't we compare the visit of the Wise Men from the East to the crib with another episode in the life of Jesus told by St. John: the discourse on the mount, or the discourse on the Bread of life. Like the Wise Men, a throng goes to encounter Jesus, because of the miracles He has done. Jesus sets about feeding all these men and women, and asks Philip: "Whence shall we buy bread, that these may eat?"^a With five barley loaves and two fish, the Lord will feed a crowd of roughly five thousand men. And there will be leftovers.

a. Jn 6:5.

This event gave rise to a teaching for the crowd, that through self-interest was expecting a new miracle. What is at stake is to work, not for a perishable food, but for a food that endures to everlasting life. Only the Son of man can give this food. And Jesus teaches them:

For the bread of God is that which cometh down from heaven and giveth life to the world. [...] I am the living bread which came down from heaven. If any man eat of this bread, he shall live for ever: and the bread that I will give is My flesh, for the life of the world. [...] Amen, amen, I say unto you: except you eat the flesh of the Son of man and drink His blood, you shall not have life in you.^b

b. Jn 6:33, 51-52, 53.

According to a very old tradition, we are going to bless pastries which we shall then eat at lunch. We shall enjoy the Twelfth Night pastries but for a single day, whereas everyday the Lord wants to make Himself a food, a living bread for everlasting life, and that for each of us, through Eucharistic com-

munion to His body and blood.

Let's receive from the Wise Men the example of their adoration. Wouldn't habit have dulled the fervour of the blessed day of our baptism, of our ordination, to such an extent that we might deserve St. Paul's warning: "For he that eats and drinks without discerning the body, eats and drinks judgment upon himself." ^a

a. 1 Co 11:29.

During Christmas-tide, let us ask the grace of a faith as simple as that of the Wise Men. On several occasions lately, the Holy Father has invited us to adoration. Let us remain with the Lord in the crib of our souls. Strengthened by His word, fed by His life, witnesses to His love, we shall then be able to bring to the world the good news that heavenly peace has come down on earth, and that God is with us, Emmanuel.

Amen, Alleluia.

