



The Holy See

EUCHARISTIC CELEBRATION
ON THE SOLEMNITY OF THE EPIPHANY OF THE LORD
HOMILY OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI

St Peter's Basilica
Tuesday, 6 January 2009

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Epiphany, the "manifestation" of Our Lord Jesus Christ, is a many-faceted mystery. The Latin tradition identifies it with the visit of the Magi to the Infant Jesus in Bethlehem and thus interprets it above all as a revelation of the Messiah of Israel to the Gentiles. The Eastern tradition on the other hand gives priority to the moment of Jesus' Baptism in the River Jordan when he manifested himself as the Only-Begotten Son of the heavenly Father, consecrated by the Holy Spirit. John's Gospel, however, also invites us to consider as an "epiphany" the Wedding at Cana, during which, by changing the water into wine, Jesus "manifested his glory; and his disciples believed in him" (Jn 2: 11). And what should we say, dear brothers and sisters, especially we priests of the New Covenant who are every day witnesses and ministers of the "epiphany" of Jesus Christ in the Holy Eucharist? The Church celebrates all the mysteries of the Lord in this most holy and most humble Sacrament in which he both reveals and conceals his glory. "*Adoro te devote, latens Deitas*" in adoration, thus we pray along with St Thomas Aquinas.

In this year 2009, which has been dedicated in a special way to astronomy to mark the fourth centenary of Galileo Galilei's first observations with the telescope, we cannot fail to pay particular attention to the symbol of the star that is so important in the Gospel account of the Magi (cf. Mt 2: 1-12). In all likelihood the Wise Men were astronomers. From their observation point, situated in the East compared to Palestine, perhaps in Mesopotamia, they had noticed the appearance of a new star and had interpreted this celestial phenomenon as the announcement of the birth of a king, specifically that in accordance with the Sacred Scriptures of the King of the Jews (cf. Nm 24: 17). The Fathers of the Church also saw this unique episode recounted by St Matthew as a sort of

cosmic "revolution" caused by the Son of God's entry into the world. For example, St John Chrysostom writes: "The star, when it stood over the young Child, stayed its course again: which thing itself was of a greater power than belongs to a star, now to hide itself, now to appear, and having appeared to stand still" (*Homily on the Gospel of Matthew, 7, 3*). St Gregory of Nazianzen states that the birth of Christ gave the stars new orbits (cf. *Dogmatic Poems, v, 53-64: PG 37, 428-429*). This is clearly to be understood in a symbolic and theological sense. In effect, while pagan theology divinized the elements and forces of the cosmos, the Christian faith, in bringing the biblical Revelation to fulfilment, contemplates only one God, Creator and Lord of the whole universe.

The divine and universal law of creation is divine love, incarnate in Christ. However, this should not be understood in a poetic but in a real sense. Moreover, this is what Dante himself meant when, in the sublime verse that concludes the *Paradiso* and the entire *Divina Commedia*, he describes God as "the Love which moves the sun and the other stars" (*Paradiso, xxxiii, 145*). This means that the stars, planets and the whole universe are not governed by a blind force, they do not obey the dynamics of matter alone. Therefore, it is not the cosmic elements that should be divinized. Indeed, on the contrary, within everything and at the same time above everything there is a personal will, the Spirit of God, who in Christ has revealed himself as Love (cf. Encyclical *Spe Salvi, 5*). If this is the case, then as St Paul wrote to the Colossians people are not slaves of the "elemental spirits of the universe" (cf. Col 2: 8) but are free, that is, capable of relating to the creative freedom of God. God is at the origin of all things and governs all things, not as a cold and anonymous engine but rather as Father, Husband, Friend, Brother and as the *Logos*, "Word-Reason" who was united with our mortal flesh once and for all and fully shared our condition, showing the superabundant power of his grace. Thus there is a special concept of the cosmos in Christianity which found its loftiest expression in medieval philosophy and theology. In our day too, it shows interesting signs of a new flourishing, thanks to the enthusiasm and faith of many scientists who following in Galileo's footsteps renounce neither reason nor faith; instead they develop both in their reciprocal fruitfulness.

Christian thought compares the cosmos to a "book" the same Galileo said this as well considering it as the work of an Author who expresses himself in the "symphony" of the Creation. In this symphony is found, at a certain point, what might be called in musical terminology a "solo", a theme given to a single instrument or voice; and it is so important that the significance of the entire work depends on it. This "solo" is Jesus, who is accompanied by a royal sign: the appearance of a new star in the firmament. Jesus is compared by ancient Christian writers to a new sun. According to current astrophysical knowledge, we should compare it with a star that is even more central, not only for the solar system but also for the entire known universe. Within this mysterious design simultaneously physical and metaphysical, which led to the appearance of the human being as the crowning of Creation's elements Jesus came into the world: "born of woman" (Gal 4: 4), as St Paul writes. The Son of man himself epitomizes the earth and Heaven, the Creation and the Creator, the flesh and the Spirit. He is the centre of the cosmos and of history, for in him the Author and his

work are united without being confused with each other.

In the earthly Jesus the culmination of Creation and of history is found but in the Risen Christ this is surpassed: the passage through death to eternal life anticipates the point of the "recapitulation" of all things in Christ (cf. Eph 1: 10). Indeed "all things", the Apostle wrote "were created through him and for him (Col 1: 16). And it is precisely with the resurrection of the dead that he became "pre-eminent in all things" (Col 1: 18). Jesus himself affirms this, appearing to his disciples after the Resurrection: "all authority in Heaven and on earth has been given to me" (Mt 28: 18). This awareness supports the way of the Church, Body of Christ, on the paths of history. There is no shadow, however dark, that can obscure Christ's light. This is why believers in Christ never lack hope, even today, in the face of the great social and financial crisis that is tormenting humanity, in the face of the destructive hatred and violence that have not ceased to stain many of the earth's regions with blood, in the face of the selfishness and pretension of the human being in establishing himself as his own God, which sometimes leads to dangerous distortions of the divine plan concerning life and the dignity of the human being, the family and the harmony of the Creation. Our efforts to free human life and the world from the forms of poison and contamination that could destroy the present and the future retain their value and meaning as I noted in the Encyclical *Spe Salvi* mentioned above even if we apparently fail or seem powerless when hostile forces appear to gain the upper hand, because "it is the great hope based upon God's promises that gives us courage and directs our action in good times and bad" (n. 35).

Christ's universal lordship is exercised in a special way on the Church. We read in the Letter to the Ephesians that God "has put all things under [Christ's] feet and has made him the head over all things for the Church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all (Eph 1: 22-23). The Epiphany is the manifestation of the Lord and as a reflection, it is the manifestation of the Church, since the Body is inseparable from the Head. Today's First Reading, from "Third Isaiah", gives us the precise perspective for understanding the reality of the Church as a mystery of reflected light: "Arise, shine" the Prophet says, addressing Jerusalem, "for your light has come, / and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you" (Is 60: 1). The Church is humanity illuminated, "baptized" in the glory of God, that is in his love, in his beauty, in his dignity. The Church knows that her own humanity, with its limitations and wretchedness, serve especially to highlight the work of the Holy Spirit. She can boast of nothing, save in her Lord. It is not from her that light comes; the glory is not hers. But this is precisely her joy, which no one can take from her: to be a "sign and instrument" of the One who is "*lumen gentium*", the light of humanity (cf. Second Vatican Council, Dogmatic Constitution *Lumen gentium*, n. 1).

Dear friends, in this Pauline Year, the Feast of the Epiphany invites the Church, and in her, every community and every individual member of the faithful, to imitate, as did the Apostle to the Gentiles, the service that the star rendered to the Magi from the East, guiding them to Jesus (cf. St Leo the Great, *Disc. 3 for Epiphany*, 5: PL 54, 244). What was Paul's life after his conversion other than a "race" to bring the light of Christ to the peoples, and vice versa, to lead the peoples to

Christ? God's grace made Paul a "star" for the Gentiles. His ministry is an example and an incentive for the Church to rediscover herself as essentially missionary and to renew the commitment to proclaim the Gospel, especially to those who do not yet know it. Yet, in looking at St Paul, we cannot forget that his preaching was completely nourished by the Sacred Scriptures. Therefore it should be powerfully reaffirmed in the perspective of the recent Assembly of the Synod of Bishops that the Church and individual Christians can be a light that leads to Christ only if they are diligently and intimately nourished by the Word of God. It is the Word, certainly not us, that illumines, purifies and converts. We are merely servants of the Word of life. This is how Paul saw himself and his ministry: as a service to the Gospel. "I do it all for the sake of the Gospel", he wrote (1 Cor 9: 23). The Church, every ecclesial community, every Bishop and every priest ought also to be able to say this: "I do it all for the sake of the Gospel". Dear brothers and sisters, pray for us, Pastors of the Church, that by assimilating the Word of God daily we may pass it on faithfully to our brethren. Yet we too pray for you, all the faithful, because every Christian is called through Baptism and Confirmation to proclaim Christ, the light of the world, in word and in the witness of his life. May the Virgin Mary, Star of Evangelization, help us to bring this mission to completion together, and may St Paul, the Apostle to the Gentiles, intercede for us from Heaven. Amen.

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