



The Holy See

EUCCHARISTIC CELEBRATION

ON THE SOLEMNITY OF THE EPIPHANY OF THE LORD

HOMILY OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI

Vatican Basilica

Friday, 6 January 2012

[Video]

Photo Gallery

Dear Brothers and Sisters!

The Epiphany is a feast of light. “Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you” (Is 60:1). With these words of the prophet Isaiah, the Church describes the content of the feast. He who is the true light, and by whom we too are made to be light, has indeed come into the world. He gives us the power to become children of God (cf. Jn 1:9,12). The journey of the wise men from the East is, for the liturgy, just the beginning of a great procession that continues throughout history. With the Magi, humanity’s pilgrimage to Jesus Christ begins – to the God who was born in a stable, who died on the Cross and who, having risen from the dead, remains with us always, until the consummation of the world (cf. Mt 28:20). The Church reads this account from Matthew’s Gospel alongside the vision of the prophet Isaiah that we heard in the first reading: the journey of these men is just the beginning. Before them came the shepherds – simple souls, who dwelt closer to the God who became a child, and could more easily “go over” to him (Lk 2:15) and recognize him as Lord. But now the wise of this world are also coming. Great and small, kings and slaves, men of all cultures and all peoples are coming. The men from the East are the first, followed by many more throughout the centuries. After the great vision of Isaiah, the reading from the Letter to the Ephesians expresses the same idea in sober and simple terms: the Gentiles share the same heritage (cf. Eph 3:6). Psalm 2 puts it like this: “I shall bequeath you the nations, put the ends of the earth in your possession” (v. 8).

The wise men from the East lead the way. They open up the path of the Gentiles to Christ. During this holy Mass, I will ordain two priests to the episcopate, I will consecrate them as shepherds of God's people. According to the words of Jesus, part of a shepherd's task is to go ahead of the flock (cf. Jn 10:4). So, allowing for all the differences in vocation and mission, we may well look to these figures, the first Gentiles to find the pathway to Christ, for indications concerning the task of bishops. What kind of people were they? The experts tell us that they belonged to the great astronomical tradition that had developed in Mesopotamia over the centuries and continued to flourish. But this information of itself is not enough. No doubt there were many astronomers in ancient Babylon, but only these few set off to follow the star that they recognized as the star of the promise, pointing them along the path towards the true King and Saviour. They were, as we might say, men of science, but not simply in the sense that they were searching for a wide range of knowledge: they wanted something more. They wanted to understand what being human is all about. They had doubtless heard of the prophecy of the Gentile prophet Balaam: "A star shall come forth out of Jacob and a sceptre shall rise out of Israel" (Num 24:17). They explored this promise. They were men with restless hearts, not satisfied with the superficial and the ordinary. They were men in search of the promise, in search of God. And they were watchful men, capable of reading God's signs, his soft and penetrating language. But they were also courageous, yet humble: we can imagine them having to endure a certain amount of mockery for setting off to find the King of the Jews, at the cost of so much effort. For them it mattered little what this or that person, what even influential and clever people thought and said about them. For them it was a question of truth itself, not human opinion. Hence they took upon themselves the sacrifices and the effort of a long and uncertain journey. Their humble courage was what enabled them to bend down before the child of poor people and to recognize in him the promised King, the one they had set out, on both their outward and their inward journey, to seek and to know.

Dear friends, how can we fail to recognize in all this certain essential elements of episcopal ministry? The bishop too must be a man of restless heart, not satisfied with the ordinary things of this world, but inwardly driven by his heart's unrest to draw ever closer to God, to seek his face, to recognize him more and more, to be able to love him more and more. The bishop too must be a man of watchful heart, who recognizes the gentle language of God and understands how to distinguish truth from mere appearance. The bishop too must be filled with the courage of humility, not asking what prevailing opinion says about him, but following the criterion of God's truth and taking his stand accordingly – "opportune – importune". He must be able to go ahead and mark out the path. He must go ahead, in the footsteps of him who went ahead of us all because he is the true shepherd, the true star of the promise: Jesus Christ. And he must have the humility to bend down before the God who made himself so tangible and so simple that he contradicts our foolish pride in its reluctance to see God so close and so small. He must devote his life to adoration of the incarnate Son of God, which constantly points him towards the path.

The liturgy of episcopal ordination interprets the essential features of this ministry in eight

questions addressed to the candidates, each beginning with the word “Vultis? – Do you want?” These questions direct the will and mark out the path to be followed. Here I shall briefly cite just a few of the most important words of this presentation, where we find explicit mention of the elements we have just considered in connection with the wise men of today’s feast. The bishops’ task is *praedicare Evangelium Christi*, it is *custodire et dirigere*, it is *pauperibus se misericordes praeberere*, it is *indesinenter orare*. Preaching the Gospel of Jesus Christ, going ahead and leading, guarding the sacred heritage of our faith, showing mercy and charity to the needy and the poor, thus mirroring God’s merciful love for us, and finally, praying without ceasing: these are the fundamental features of the episcopal ministry. Praying without ceasing means: never losing contact with God, letting ourselves be constantly touched by him in the depths of our hearts and, in this way, being penetrated by his light. Only someone who actually knows God can lead others to God. Only someone who leads people to God leads them along the path of life.

The restless heart of which we spoke earlier, echoing Saint Augustine, is the heart that is ultimately satisfied with nothing less than God, and in this way becomes a loving heart. Our heart is restless for God and remains so, even if every effort is made today, by means of most effective anaesthetizing methods, to deliver people from this unrest. But not only are we restless for God: God’s heart is restless for us. God is waiting for us. He is looking for us. He knows no rest either, until he finds us. God’s heart is restless, and that is why he set out on the path towards us – to Bethlehem, to Calvary, from Jerusalem to Galilee and on to the very ends of the earth. God is restless for us, he looks out for people willing to “catch” his unrest, his passion for us, people who carry within them the searching of their own hearts and at the same time open themselves to be touched by God’s search for us. Dear friends, this was the task of the Apostles: to receive God’s unrest for man and then to bring God himself to man. And this is your task as successors of the Apostles: let yourselves be touched by God’s unrest, so that God’s longing for man may be fulfilled.

The wise men followed the star. Through the language of creation, they discovered the God of history. To be sure – the language of creation alone is not enough. Only God’s word, which we encounter in sacred Scripture, was able to mark out their path definitively. Creation and Scripture, reason and faith, must come together, so as to lead us forward to the living God. There has been much discussion over what kind of star it was that the wise men were following. Some suggest a planetary constellation, or a supernova, that is to say one of those stars that is initially quite weak, in which an inner explosion releases a brilliant light for a certain time, or a comet, etc. This debate we may leave to the experts. The great star, the true supernova that leads us on, is Christ himself. He is as it were the explosion of God’s love, which causes the great white light of his heart to shine upon the world. And we may add: the wise men from the East, who feature in today’s Gospel, like all the saints, have themselves gradually become constellations of God that mark out the path. In all these people, being touched by God’s word has, as it were, released an explosion of light, through which God’s radiance shines upon our world and shows us the path. The saints are stars of God, by whom we let ourselves be led to him for whom our whole being longs. Dear

friends: you followed the star Jesus Christ when you said “yes” to the priesthood and to the episcopacy. And no doubt smaller stars have enlightened and helped you not to lose your way. In the litany of saints we call upon all these stars of God, that they may continue to shine upon you and show you the path. As you are ordained bishops, you too are called to be stars of God for men, leading them along the path towards the true light, towards Christ. So let us pray to all the saints at this hour, asking them that you may always live up to this mission you have received, to show God’s light to mankind.

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