

The secular world really does not understand us or our celebrations around the Nativity of Our Lord. Usually around this time of year we see a “war on Christmas” as public officials, media, and retailers urge us towards a more generalized celebration, principally by using terms such as “Happy Holidays” instead of “Merry Christmas.”

But this year is different. This year the war on Christmas has broadened into an attack on the family. The politics of the pandemic are being used to lessen the joy of our Christmas season. We have been told to be less extravagant in our holiday meals, less generous in our gift giving, and we are even being told who we should and should not invite to our family gatherings.

To blindly follow the edicts of politicians without tempering those comments with Christian virtues, is to make false idols of political figures. And these false idols seek to draw us away from God by offering us an alternative. But the government is not our God, and this is a season of joy, generosity, and family.

In the middle of all this politically correct madness, it is easy to forget the reason we celebrate the birth of Christ.

In the ancient Church there were three great festivals, three high holy days that were celebrated with special solemnity; Passover, that is Easter, Pentecost, and Epiphany. Epiphany is the day on which the newborn king is revealed to the world. Today, on this celebration of the Solemnity of the Epiphany, we are reminded of what we celebrate, and why.

At the very beginning, God created man to be full of grace. But our first parents turned away from Him. They felt they could get along just fine without God. They reacted out of pride rather than humility, and look where it has gotten us. We lost the robe of grace that God meant for us to have, and we saw that we were naked. The world we live in became a very dark place.

Having lost that grace, our first parents could no longer bear to be in God's presence, but even as they prepared to go out into the fallen world, God promised that He would send someone who would lead us out of the darkness and back into the light. For thousands of years we waited. And finally, God sent us the Savior, the Deliverer, as a baby, born in humble surroundings, in the center of the world.

Jesus did not come to us as a philosopher, He is not a nice guy who loves everyone without reservation, He is not even a standard for us to live up to. Jesus comes to us as a King, to rule us and lead us out of the darkened world of sin and death and into the light of God's grace.

Herod trembled because he knew this. The Magi rejoiced because they knew this.

Even before the infant Jesus can talk, He teaches us that there are two ways we can respond to the coming of such a king: Herod's or the Magi's.

Herod was the King of the Jews, but he was imposed upon the people by a foreign power. He was a murderous, despotic king, guilty of killing his

own people in order to maintain his grip on power and prestige. So when the Magi come and ask where is the newborn King of the Jews, Herod feels threatened. His first thought is what this new king may mean to his life of privilege and political power. If this newborn king is not destroyed or discredited, it could spell the end of all his labors.

The Magi on the other hand, do not fear the demands that this new king will make on their personal lives. Instead they rejoice to know that God's savior is finally coming. Instead of jealously hoarding and protecting their treasures, treasure that represents all they had achieved in their lives, they generously offer them to Christ as gestures of honor, respect, and allegiance.

Whenever Christ enters our lives, which He does every day through the voice of conscience, the teachings of His Church, and the designs of Providence, we must choose in whose steps we will follow, Herod's or the Magi's.

Will we tremble, afraid of what God may demand of us? Or will we rejoice, glad to have such a glorious Lord to follow? We have both possibilities in our hearts, it is up to us to choose. Saint Augustine, in his book, the City of God, said this:

“What we see then, is that two societies have issued from two kinds of love. Worldly society has flowered from a selfish love which dared to despise even God, whereas the communion of saints is rooted in a love of God that is ready to trample on self. In a word, this latter relies on the Lord, whereas the other boasts that it can get along by itself. The city of man seeks the praise of men, whereas the height of glory for the other is to hear God in the witness of conscience.”

Sometimes we react like Herod instead of like the Magi because we doubt God's goodness. It is almost expected nowadays for riots, shootings, and even natural disasters to be followed by headlines that scream at us, “Where is God?”

We may look at injustice and hardship in the world and think: “How could God really be wise, good and powerful if He let's all that stuff happen?” But that is a narrow, self-centered way to look at suffering. In the first place, it ignores all the wonderful and good things that exist and happen in the world. But in the second place it ignores the good that God can and does bring out of suffering.

Saint Teresa of Avila, taught us this prayer.

*Let nothing trouble you, let nothing frighten you,
Everything passes, God never changes,
Patience obtains all,
Whoever has God, wants for nothing,
God alone is enough.*

When we suffer, it proves that we are not God, that we are not in complete control of our lives and the world; suffering exposes our limitations, and opens our hearts to God's grace. That opens the door to humility, the virtue that Herod lacked, and the virtue that the Wise Men had.

Humility and wisdom always go together, and they produce patience, compassion, and inner joy. Suffering, when we live it with Christ, can bring those lasting treasures into our hands, because it forces us to let go of false, self-centered illusions.

We are not meant to control everything; we are meant to humbly follow Christ, to trust Him, to kneel before Him, like the Magi, and say with our lives, “thy will be done, not mine.”

About a year before he died, St. John Paul II was already visibly declining in health. He couldn't move himself around, and he couldn't speak clearly. He was an icon of pain and suffering and everyone knew he would not be with us much longer.

An American bishop visited him about this time, for his official five year update that every bishop is required to give to the Pope. At the end of their meeting the bishop looked at the Pope sadly and said, “Holy Father, it saddens me to think that this is probably the last time I will see you.”

St. John Paul looked up at the bishop, smiled, and said, “O really your excellency? I didn't know you were having health troubles.”

The wise give everything over to Christ and they go home full of joy.

So today we remember that God invites every person to leave the darkness and enter into the light. We respond to that invitation by bringing our gifts, the fruit of our labors, and laying them at His feet.

And we must bring everything to Him. We must examine our lives to see if there is anything we are holding back from God. Is there anything we have locked away in our souls and refuse to give Jesus the key?

Maybe it's our goals. Maybe we are set on great achievements to give meaning to our lives. But they will not. Only Christ can do that. The only achievement that will last is that of fulfilling His will, following His example and His teachings. Today let us leave those achievements, those gold medals we covet so much, at the feet of the Christ child, just like the Magi offered the gift of gold.

Maybe it's the affections of the heart. Maybe we think that the perfect relationship will give meaning to our lives. But without Christ in our lives we will never enjoy that perfect relationship. Christ is the one who gives every relationship its lasting beauty and joy. If we strive to please Him first, then He will make our relationships pleasing beyond our wildest dreams. Today let us lay the affections of our hearts at His feet, just as the Magi offered the sweet smell of frankincense.

Or perhaps it's our sufferings. Maybe we are angry at God for the hurt we have experienced in life. But if He has permitted it, it's only because He knows He can transform it. Let us let go of our need to control our

lives and lay our sufferings at the feet of Our Lord, just as the Magi offered their Myrrh, an ointment used to prepare bodies for burial.

The visit of the Magi reminds us that all people, of all nations, are invited to sing the Lord's praises. For all have been called to hear the good news, and worship the long awaited Messiah and King with the gift of our lives. Today Our Lord and King is revealed to the world, will we greet him like Herod, or like the Magi?