



Sovereign Order of Saint John of Jerusalem ©
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Chancellor's Update

Epiphany

At this great feast of manifestation, we will endeavor to learn more about the visit of the Magi from the Fathers of the early Church. Our emphasis will be on the star that guided them, the gifts they brought and their return to their country by another way.

Saint Gregory the Great tells us that at the birth of the Redeemer an angel appeared to the shepherds of Judea because an angel, a being of reason, should announce Him to the Jews, who used their reason to know God. On the other hand, Gentiles, who did not reason to a knowledge of God, were led by signs. In 1 Corinthians, Saint Paul tells us, *A sign is not for believers, but for unbelievers*. Since the heavens recognized Him as God, the sign used was a star. This same star even concluded the journey of the wise men by guiding them to the house where the child was.

St. John Chrysostom also comments on the star. He says that through this sign it is made known to them that the Lord of the heavens is born King of the Jews. How did they know? Moses wrote of a certain prophet of the Gentiles, Balaam, who foretold in definite words the coming of Christ and His incarnation from a virgin. *A star shall rise out of Jacob and a scepter shall spring up from Israel* (Numbers xxiv. 17), so that from the symbol of a star the union of man with the Son of God, of human nature with the divine, might become known. Seeing the sign of the new star they accordingly believed, knowing that the prophecy of their ancestor was fulfilled. During the night of ignorance, Christ shone forth unto the salvation of the world; so that by the sign of the newly risen star, even the Magi knew the Creator of heaven as the King of the Jews.

Chrysostom also notes that no other star moved as this one. This moved from the east to the south. It seems to have been visible, not only in the night, but in the full light of day. Also, now it appeared, now it hid itself. It had no course of its own, but when the Magi traveled, it traveled with them. When they halted, it likewise halted. Then it pointed out the Offspring of the Virgin, not by remaining on high, but by coming low, which indicates, not the action of a star, but of some rational power. So this star was but the sign of invisible power, revealing itself in this form.

Next, Saint Gregory tells us that the Magi come bearing gold, incense and myrrh. Gold is offered in tribute to a king, incense is offered in sacrifice to God, myrrh is used to embalm the bodies of the dead. The Magi therefore proclaim by their mystic gifts, who it is that they adore; with gold they proclaim Him King, with incense that He is God, by myrrh that He is mortal. To the newborn King we offer gold, if we shine before Him in the brightness of heavenly wisdom. We offer Him incense, if we consume the thoughts of the flesh upon the altar of our heart, so that in our heavenly desires we send up to God an odour of sweetness. We offer Him myrrh, when we mortify through abstinence the

vices of our flesh. By myrrh we preserve dead flesh from corruption. Flesh is corrupt when this mortal body is given over to wantonness; and carnal men, like dead beasts rotting in their dung, end their lives amid the foulness of their lust. Therefore do we offer myrrh to God, when we safeguard this mortal body of ours from the corruption of wantonness by the preservatives of chastity. (Editor's note: Our spiritual leaders should be talking about global immorality that leads to corruption of souls, not global warming.) Commenting also on the gifts of the Magi, Pope Saint Leo asks us to bring forth from our hearts gifts that are worthy of Him. For though He is the Giver of all gifts, yet He also looks for the fruits of our diligence: for the kingdom of heaven is not given to those who sleep, but to those who labour and watch in the commandments of God; so that if we have not wasted His gift, through that which He gave us, let us merit to receive that which He promised. The good pope exhorts us to refrain from every evil work, and follow after those that are chaste and just, for the children of the light should cast from themselves the works of darkness. Accordingly, he recommends turning away from hatreds, putting away lying, overcoming pride with humility, casting out avarice, loving bountifulness. Members should be in harmony with the Head so that they may merit to be sharers in His promised joys.

Commenting on the fact that the Magi were bidden to return to their own land by another way, Saint Gregory says that they intimate to us what we ought to do. It is paradise that is our true country, to which, having come to know Jesus, we are forbidden to return by the way we came. For we left our land by the way of pride and disobedience, by following after the things of this world, by tasting forbidden food, and so we must return to it by the way of tears, by obedience, by contempt of the world, and by restraining the desires of the flesh.

Likewise, St. Ambrose tells us that the Magi returned more truly believing than when they came. There are two ways: one that leads to destruction, and the other that leads to the Kingdom. There is the way of sinners that leads to Herod; there is the Way of Christ by which we return to our country. For here we have no lasting dwelling, but with Christ we have eternity. Let us turn away from Herod, ruler for a while of an earthly power, that we may come to the everlasting dwelling of our heavenly country.

Saint Gregory concludes with an exhortation. Let us return then to our own country by another way, and if we have cut ourselves off from the joys of heaven because of earthly delights, let us recover them again through penance. Let us punish our offences with tears. Let us come before His presence with thanksgiving. Let no enticement of sensual pleasure deceive us, and no vain delight seduce us. If we are truly celebrating a solemnity of God, let us fear exceedingly the commandments of God. And a sacrifice that is pleasing to God is sorrow because of sin. When we received baptism our past sins were wiped away; but our new sins cannot be washed again in the waters of baptism. Let us cleanse our conscience with tears and avoid new evils, thus returning to our own land by another way.

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