

I was blessed to grow up in a very sheltered and safe environment. My childhood was lived inside a virtual cocoon. (Today, we'd call it a ghetto.) In Fort Atkinson, as in most small towns in rural Iowa, everybody knew each other; many were related to others in town; all (or most) went to the same church (I could count the number of non-Catholics on the fingers of my two hands and toes of one foot!); and all were white. Often everyone also shared a common ethnic background. English was the common language. All held a similar slant on how morality was understood and practiced and shared similar hopes and fears about the outside world. Daily life, our image and relationship to God were lived comfortably from inside that cocoon.

There's a wonderful strength in that, but also a negative underside. When there are no real strangers in your life, when everyone looks like you do, believes what you do and speaks like you do, when your world is made up of your own kind, it's going to take some painful subsequent stretching, at some deep parts of your soul to accept, and be comfortable with the fact, that people who are very different from you, have different skin colors, speak different languages, live in different countries, have different religions and have a different way of understanding things are just as real and precious to God as you are.

This is the challenge the Magi represented to King Herod and the religious leaders of Jerusalem. By culture and religious tradition they were of the mind that "Outside of Judaism, there is no salvation." Gentiles, all non-Jews, were collectively and derisively referred to as "dogs." The report of the Magi of the appearance of the star portending the birth of a new king of the Jews set off alarm bells politically and religiously. Sadly, we know that Herod and the religious authorities were so closed in the comfortable cocoon of their tradition, beliefs, laws and rituals that they failed to recognize the time of God's visitation in Jesus. So threatened was Herod that he subsequently ordered the slaughter of all boys in Bethlehem three years of age and younger, a senseless massacre we commemorate on December 28th, the Feast of the Holy Innocents.

Epiphany celebrates the universality of God's gift of salvation in Jesus. God's gift in Jesus, while taking historical flesh and blood in a particular time and place, the persons of the Magi reminds us, is for all peoples. No one people, nation, or church has exclusive claim on God's presence and grace. The Second Vatican Council teaches us that while the fullness of God's gift of salvation brought by Jesus "subsists" in the Catholic Church, (is given its most full expression) other Christian and even non-Christian traditions

also contain and reveal elements of the grace of God's revelation. St. Paul reminds us that "the Gentiles are co-heirs, members of the same body, and copartners in the promise in Christ Jesus through the Gospel" (Eph. 3:5-6).

Epiphany's message is especially timely as news reports from Europe and in our own country detail growing political and religious movements toward isolationism and nationalism, a closing off of physical as well as spiritual borders to immigrants and refugees. The Solemnity of the Epiphany recounts the journeys of the Magi and the Holy Family, all migrants, and in the case of the Holy Family, refugees fleeing political persecution.

In a television address to our nation's Bishops in Baltimore this past November, Pope Francis stated: "Throughout its history, the Church in your country has welcomed and integrated new waves of immigrants. In the rich variety of their languages and cultural traditions, they have shaped the changing face of the American Church. ...Our great challenge is to create a culture of encounter, which encourages individuals and groups to share the richness of their traditions and experiences, to break down walls and to build bridges. The Church in America is called to 'go out' from its comfort zone and to be a leaven of communion. Communion among ourselves, with our fellow Christians, and with all who seek a future of hope. ...The Christian community is meant to be a sign and prophecy of God's plan for the entire human family. We are called to be bearers of good news for society gripped by disconcerting social, cultural and spiritual shifts, and increasing polarization."

Epiphany invites us to allow the light of Christ we have experienced to pierce the darkness of our personal and collective cocoon, to be stretched by the gifts peoples of other lands and cultures bring, to be the Church "catholic", the Jerusalem Isaiah speaks of, a "light to the nations."

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