

## THE EPIPHANY OF OUR LORD

BY

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Of how one should seek and find the spiritual nativity in the light of grace, by self-effacement and the suppression of all natural light. Of the price of sufferings and afflictions, and in particular of the three offerings of the Magi.

*Ubi est qui natus est rex Judaeorum?*

'Where is he that is born King of the Jews?'

(Matt: 2, 2.)



We are come indeed to adore him and to offer him our mystical gifts: gold, frankincense and myrrh. The reasonable soul, by its natural light alone, comes to the knowledge of the existence of God. But what is he? Who is he? Where is he? So many questions to which she gives no answer and of which she ignores the solution. Hence, for

the holy and religious soul, arises a loving desire to seek God with ardent solicitude. She wants to know what he is, who is this hidden and unknown Being.

Then, in this laborious searching, suddenly there appears a star, and this is nothing but a ray of heavenly grace, a divine light which seems to say interiorly to the soul: he is born! At the same time this light leads the soul to the place of his birth which no natural light could have pointed out to her. And so we see that all who seek for this nativity by the light of reason alone do not arrive there: they stray and lose their way, they make no progress in virtue. In fact, to get there it is not under the leading of natural light that one must place oneself. The divine light alone can make known to man the nature and place of this nativity; that alone can lead him to it. But alas! most people will not or cannot bear this brilliant radiation which would lead them to this birth-place; they think to get there by leaning on their natural reasoning, on exterior realities. This however is impossible; they also wait for a favourable time which will never come, whilst in the heart of many of them the desire to know goes on growing until it penetrates and consumes the marrow of their bones. So they are obliged, in order to satisfy this desire, in order to know this nativity, to exhaust all their natural strength; yet all the natural lights they make use of are powerless to teach them, for they know nothing about it themselves.

But here we find three things to consider. First of all the desire

that makes them seek; then there is the manner of seeking. Finally the discovery of this nativity. In the same way, in every man we distinguish three things: first that he is bound by flesh and blood, that is the corporal senses and, if I may say so, sensuality itself. The second is his reason or intelligence. The third is the pure and bare substance of the soul.

These three things are very different and each one of them sees realities in its own way from its own angle. The sun, for instance, although one in itself, is revealed in divers ways according as its light comes through a black glass, a yellow glass or a white glass. It is not too absurd to compare sensuality to black glass, reason and intelligence to yellow glass, the pure and naked spirit to white glass. Now when one raises oneself from sensuality to reason, from reason to spirituality, what was black becomes yellow and what was yellow becomes white. Thus one arrives at perfect simplicity and in that simplicity alone shines the true light, there alone is it truly received. When all images are effaced, when there are no longer any types or similitudes but only the pure substance, then is manifested this nativity. There, in this darkness of nature, is wrapped the whole of heaven. Supposing someone fixes his gaze upon the sun, he becomes incapable of seeing anything else, precisely because he is filled with its excessive brilliance. It is the same with a soul filled with this divine light; all other forms and images disappear. When that light is to shine, all natural light is blotted out and extinguished. The star which showed the place of the Saviour's birth to the Magi was no natural star like the others, it had not like them any natural position in the firmament.

Now, notice that images of exterior things perceived by the senses seem much nobler in the senses than they really are. As we have said, the senses represent black glass. Then comes intelligence which strips off the material part of sensible images and renders them intellectual. At once yellow succeeds the black. Let us suppose that intelligence getting above itself renounces itself and reaches up to the pure and bare spirit, all these thenceforth become white. It is here alone the star shines and it is towards the manifestation of that star that all human life should be directed in detachment and simplicity.

These three things correspond to the three gifts of the Magi. We read actually that they offered gold, frankincense and myrrh.

And first of all whoever has tasted myrrh knows how bitter it is. That signifies the bitterness of penance which is the first thing needed in our search for God. When someone has just left the world to serve God, he must give up pleasures, comforts and luxuries of

this life, for these are the first obstacles. In fact it is absolutely essential to break away from any possessions that hold the soul captive. This to begin with seems difficult and very bitter. But it is necessary; true penance demands that the more a thing gives us pleasure the more we shall experience bitterness in leaving it. We must then exercise a more attentive supervision over what pleases us. The greater the pleasure the more bitter will taste the myrrh. Why, it will be the most distasteful of bitter things.

But someone will say to me: How can any man in his lifetime do without pleasure. Obviously if he is hungry, he eats; if he is devoured with thirst, he drinks; if sleep overtakes him, he sleeps; if he is suffering from the cold he warms himself. All that certainly is not bitter but rather very agreeable to nature and you cannot change nature; in fact it remains what it is.

That is true. In all these things we do experience pleasure but we must take care not to let it get a hold in our interior soul. This pleasure should evaporate with the passing exterior act: we should not dwell on it, we should not seek it or try to hold on to it or rest in it with affection and enjoyment.

All delight that we find in this world or in creatures should glide past us like a shadow. It is important to be mortified on this point and to conquer nature. I go further, it is even necessary to conquer and keep in order the enjoyment that comes from conversation with the friends of God, with virtuous men. Everything that favours our natural inclinations must be fought against, until Herod with all his family are really dead, that is to say with all those who seek to destroy our souls. Do not be under any illusion; but let each one consider and look closely at the state of his soul; let him not loosen the bridle of liberty, but dwell always in holy fear.

There is yet another myrrh far more bitter than the preceding one. This one comes from God himself and is called desolation or distress from within and without. If we would only accept this myrrh with all our hearts, with the same love which God shows in giving it to us, we should experience a marvellous joy; our very being would be transformed. What peace and happiness we should possess! and who could say what nobility of soul we should derive from it? It is certain that the smallest cross, as well as the greatest, that comes to man with God's permission proceeds from a deep and unutterable tenderness. Yes, the greatest gift God can give us, the one that most manifests his love, the one that is most beneficial to us, is the cross that he sends us, provided that we know how to accept it. That is saying too little: every cross that comes our way, every trial however small is willed by God, foreseen from all eternity,

pre-ordained out of love for us, in the place, time and manner of its happening. Nothing is of less moment than one hair of our heads, yet it is written that the very hairs of our head are numbered. Let us suppose you have a bad finger or a headache, your feet are cold, you feel hungry or thirsty, you are grieved by a word or gesture; in short, something disagreeable has happened to you, rest assured that all that is to dispose your heart towards this joyous and holy nativity; it has all been arranged by God, predestined by God, who has decreed that all that should happen in the number, weight and measure in which it actually has happened, so that none of it could have been lessened or changed. Certainly from all eternity God has foreseen that eyes would be placed in my head. If I should lose an eye, if I should cease to see or to hear, still the heavenly Father has foreseen that it should be so. In his eternal wisdom he has permitted deliberately that this should come about.

Is it not only right, then, that opening interiorly the eyes and ears of my soul, I should give thanks to my beloved Creator for having wrought in me his eternal designs? Am I on the contrary to grieve. No, a thousand times no. Rather should I rejoice. On the same principle, the death of those we love, loss of fortune or reputation, being deprived of rest or no matter what good that God has deigned to grant us, all that prepares us, all that is sent to us so that we may attain to true peace, on condition that we know how to accept it, as we have already said.

We sometimes meet people who, under the stress of trouble, come to us and say: 'Father or Master, things are going badly with me; I have all sorts of troubles, I am suffering endless vexations'. To these I answer: 'Well done'. 'No, no', they say, 'Master, it is all through my own fault. I have allowed thoughts to occupy my mind.' I say again: 'Whether it is your fault or not, believe me that this cross has been sent to you by God; thank him for it, bear with it; suffer it and be resigned to it'.

Whenever God gives us the myrrh of afflictions, he has no other motive than to raise us to great perfection and to make us attain to those sublime heights that few can scale. In order to procure for us the benefits that come from trial and suffering, God multiplies our troubles and makes everything seem hard to us. Surely he could just as easily have given us bread direct instead of sending us wheat and corn. But he wanted us to make bread out of wheat ourselves, so as to teach us the necessity of working for everything.

And thus it is that in his eternal wisdom he has disposed all things, foreseen everything, pre-ordained everything. A painter, drawing a line for a portrait, has already decided in his thought

on its length and breadth, if he wants to produce a work of art, he has already planned the colouring and what shades are to predominate. Now, never has an artist conceived a picture like God has planned his work: he has laboured at it with infinite care, determining what trials and sorrows a soul will pass through, drawing the outline and choosing the colours that will bring it to perfection of form, on condition that the soul accepts his gifts and consents to use the myrrh placed at its disposal. But alas! how many do we not see, who, not satisfied with this God-sent myrrh, make a choice of numerous others and rack their brains to find imaginary trials and mortifications.

And yet after long sufferings they have drawn very little grace, because they did not act wisely but trusted in their own ideas and mistaken natural impulses. Whether it was a case of laborious penance, of rigorous abstinence, of assiduous prayer, of studied devotion, nothing can profit them very much, once they have become attached to them from choice, as if God were obliged to wait on them as long as they wished.

They are, alas, all mistaken. God, as a matter of fact, only rewards in man what has been his own work. In paradise, in a blessed eternity, it is not man's will but solely the work that God has accomplished in man that will receive an imperishable crown. Nevertheless everyone must direct all his efforts towards God, co-operating with his grace, so as not to receive it in vain. But be assured that what has not been God's work in you, will count for very little.

Finally, there is a third kind of myrrh, which is the bitterest of all, and that God gives in interior anguish, in the darkness of the spirit. Whoever is willing to taste this myrrh must endure all bitterness and mortify his flesh and blood, and his very nature. The most painful exterior penance fades before this interior work which is entirely different. Only those who have experienced it can tell us under what extraordinary forms and in what astonishing variety these trials present themselves. This explains the great troubles of every kind, the anguish and terrible bitterness through which certain souls have to pass. No one can surmount them alone. Only God knows why he allows them.

Not to profit by them would be the greatest misfortune; no words could describe it and no one could sufficiently deplore it. For no intelligence can understand the unutterable love that drives God to give us this myrrh. It is there for us to use; unfortunately we pass it by as in a dream, we neglect it and know not how to profit by it. For the most part those who get a taste of it cry out: 'Alas, Master,

I am worn out with this interior dryness and dreadful darkness!' I reply to them: 'My beloved son, suffer it, bear this trial patiently, and soon you will find you have benefited more than if you had been enjoying strong sensible devotion'.

Again, there are two ways of sharing in this myrrh, through the senses or through the intelligence. The senses taste the myrrh exteriorly in the following way: some souls want to be too wise and to show off their knowledge that some exterior event is the result of chance. Mere chance, they say, was the cause, persuaded that they could have avoided and not had to suffer their present trouble had they acted in such and such a way; they decide dogmatically how everything happens. They want to be wiser than God; they would willingly advise him and teach him to govern.

And because they are unwilling to receive myrrh at his hands, they are weighed down with immense affliction; they are experiencing a myrrh of insupportable bitterness. Others touch upon this interior myrrh with their mental subtlety: they discuss it, seek to free themselves from the torture by intellectual reasoning. And so it often happens that simple and poor ignorant souls advance higher and more quickly than these learned people occupying themselves with subtle reasonings. We can easily divine the cause: simple souls follow God in simplicity and know of no other way than to put complete trust in him.

Oh, if only the intellectuals would condescend to imitate these ignorant people and, like them, abandon themselves entirely to God, how much more wisely would they act and how easily would they reach their soul's deepest centre! Indeed their intellect would act more freely and with a better understanding of all things. In fact if, on this point, they would yield themselves solely to God, everything would be a help to them, even to the shedding of one drop of blood.

And now rises like a fragile column a breath of incense. Frankincense was the Magi's second present. Now, to begin with, incense has an agreeable smell. When fire touches a grain of incense it extracts from it its hidden perfume; this perfume is dispersed in the atmosphere, it rises up shedding on all sides a delicious odour. The fire represents the ardent love of God hidden in prayer. Prayer is the incense which expresses and gives off its perfume under the warmth of love and devotion.

Prayer, in fact, according to the definition of theologians, is the raising of the soul to God. Now, just as straw is winnowed to extract the wheat and after the milling is good for nothing except to make

a dung-hill or stable litter, so vocal prayer has no other aim than to excite the soul to interior devotion and to cause it to give forth a pleasing odour before God. When this perfume has been diffused by the soul, vocal prayer has no longer any meaning. However, we must make an exception for those who are bound to public prayer under ecclesiastical precept, or through some special obligation, as for instance a prayer imposed by the confessor.

The third gift offered by the Magi was gold. Those who offer this gift are distinguished from all other men: we must congratulate and admire them and that's all we can say about it. Indeed from all eternity they have been begotten by the Father in the Son. They go through life unnoticed; they do not know themselves, for they esteem themselves as the last of all. No one knows them; they are nameless. God alone knows them. He offers himself in them. The greatest tribute we can make them is to say no one knows how admirable they are and what marvels take place in them.

Someone will ask: Are we permitted to pray that we may become one of these? No, that is only permitted to those to whom God has interiorly given the grace. No one else can aspire to it. And so, I affirm, on sincere consideration, that no one can or ought to pray for this. Why? Because God, who alone can bestow such a gift, can alone ask it of himself. No one else can. And so God is the advocate and the donor and there are no others.

But there is another gold that we are perfectly free to ask for, and that is the kind that consists in a prayer addressed to God to give us a deep aversion from all perishable creatures and from ourselves so as to draw us completely to him. That is the essence of conversion and not only are we permitted to ask for it, but it is our duty to do so. It is for that that the star shone showing us the nativity. Heaven opens over the heads of these souls, everything invites them to enter there: the voice of the Father is heard by each one saying: 'This is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased'. (Matt. 3 and 17.)

The Holy Spirit in his turn, under the appearance of a dove, descends truly upon them; he manifests himself and thus is accomplished the miracle worked today by our Saviour, the changing of the water into wine. For, if I may so express it, these men are changed into God, becoming truly divine and deified. Nothing remains of them but the soul alone and God alone. May Almighty God grant us to seek, with the Magi, this glorious nativity, so that we may be made worthy of finding it in all truth.

Amen.

*Translated by S.M.I.*