

## EPIPHANY

Our Gospel reading has one phrase that can easily be overlooked but that is rather puzzling if you think about it. On arriving in Jerusalem, the magi are said to inquire about the whereabouts of “the newborn king of the Jews” because, they say, “we saw *his star* at its rising.” That term “his star” obviously implies that there was one particular star specifically associated with this one child. I don’t know enough about ancient astronomy or astrology to know whether or not many persons were then thought to have their own star. Today most people would surely not accept such a notion, although I recently heard on the radio a commercial advertising that one could, for a rather hefty fee, give someone the gift of having a particular star named after him or her. That sounds to me like some group’s rather devious money-making scheme. I would much rather receive a gift that could actually be touched and put to use.

What I most want to emphasize about our Gospel reading, however, is the very notion of traveling to some other country. The reasons why people do this are varied, but there is always some purpose or motivation. The evangelist Matthew does not tell us anything about the emotions of the magi, but they clearly weren’t seeking some quid pro quo, for the text says that they returned to their own country shortly after offering their gifts. If we dare psychologize, I suppose we could say that their satisfaction came simply from knowing that they had paid appropriate homage to this “newborn king.” Other people travel to distant lands mainly to visit friends or relatives who live elsewhere or simply out of curiosity to learn more firsthand about our remarkable world: the different ways in which people live their lives, the foods they eat, the scenery of the countryside, and so forth. In short, the trips we take are usually for the purpose of something pleasant, whether it be visiting friends or relatives or having a relaxing vacation.

But there are other kinds of trips abroad that are of a very different character, travel undertaken not of one’s own accord, as was the case with the magi, but rather out of a kind of desperation. Indeed, the verses in Matthew’s Gospel that immediately follow the ones we heard

today tell of a very different kind of journey, the flight of the Holy Family to Egypt to escape the murderous designs of King Herod. This, of course, is an integral part of the whole story, and it's the part I want to reflect on. To use the proper language, what Jesus, Mary, and Joseph were on that occasion is captured by one word, "refugees," perhaps the best-known refugees in the history of the world.

Pondering their plight—having to leave their native land, their friends and relatives, their means of livelihood, their possessions—can help us better understand and want to do something about the fact that there are millions of persons in that situation today, many of them in that very same part of the world. Just from Syria alone there are, almost incredibly, more than three and a half million persons who have fled that country since the outbreak of civil war several years ago. That is about one third of the entire Syrian population, with many of them living in camps in Turkey, Iraq, Jordan, or Lebanon, often in tents that offer little protection from the winter cold that is now beginning to set in. The vast majority of these are women, children, and the elderly, in other words, persons who are especially vulnerable and least able to look out for themselves. A few months ago, a delegation from the United States Catholic Bishops Conference visited that part of the world and met people whose stories are heartbreaking: children who have seen members of their family killed in the civil war and then have had to bury them themselves, young boys barely in their teens who are now responsible for their younger siblings since they are all orphans, little boys and girls who are terrified at the very sound of an airplane because it reminds them of the plane that once bombed their home or neighborhood.

What to do? For one thing, despite the enormous amount of money needed to help these refugees through one or another of the various agencies that are working on site, groups like Catholic Relief Services, Caritas Internationalis, and Doctors without Borders, it would be wrong

to say “I’ll give nothing” simply because my widow’s mite would be only a tiny fraction of what is needed. No, the model for all of us should be the attitude of St. Paul in the New Testament, for his letters how us how very intent he was on raising funds from various Christian communities to help the poor in Jerusalem. In other words, we should do something even if we can’t do everything. If there is any meaning at all to the phrase “innocent suffering,” it is certainly captured in the faces of those Syrian children that can be seen in newspapers, magazines, or on the Internet. How badly they need our help.

Secondly, we should pray fervently and specifically for these refugees. The Gospels tell us of occasions when Jesus asks one or another person the question, “What do you want me to do for you?” This shows us that the Lord is not averse to particular requests, so let us at times be quite specific in what we pray for. Often this is best done in our own words, but we can also use prayers composed by others. Here is a beautiful prayer for the Syrian refugees that comes from our Conference of Catholic Bishops:

Almighty eternal God, source of all compassion,  
the promise of your mercy and saving help fills our hearts with hope.  
Hear the cries of the people of Syria;  
bring healing to those suffering from the violence,  
and comfort to those mourning the dead.  
Empower and encourage Syria’s neighbors  
in their care and welcome for refugees.  
Convert the hearts of those who have taken up arms,  
and strengthen the resolve of those committed to peace.

O God of hope and Father of mercy,  
your Holy Spirit inspires us to look beyond ourselves and our own needs.  
Inspire leaders to choose peace over violence  
and to seek reconciliation with enemies.  
Inspire the Church around the world with compassion for the people of Syria,  
and fill us with hope for a future of peace built on justice for all.  
We ask this through Jesus Christ, Prince of Peace and Light of the World,  
who lives and reigns forever and ever. Amen.

Thirdly, since it is not likely that any of us have the wherewithal or the proper training to actually go serve in one of those refugee camps, let us at least recognize that there are other people living near us who may not be, in the strict sense of the word, “refugees” but whom we could help escape from one or another kind of danger. The needed escape may not be a matter of physical location but rather of inner transformation. Ideally, that sort of transformation will take place when people come together at places like this to celebrate the Eucharist, but let’s not kid ourselves into thinking that this is the only or even the best place. The other morning I read some thought-provoking lines from a book of meditations. The author wrote: “If [many people] have abandoned the churches of the world, it’s because of a certain aversion to hypocrisy. They know they cannot be perfect, so they just opt out of the whole thing. More transformation is taking place in the Wednesday night church basements, with things like twelve-step meetings, than in Sunday morning sanctuaries where people are urged to compete in worthiness contests they cannot win.”<sup>1</sup> That claim may be unduly harsh, but at least let us recognize that we are here not in any sense to show off, not in any sense to compete with one another, but rather to be open

to the transforming grace of Christ. That, and that alone, is what will bring us to the goal of our life's journey, even more surely than the star that led the magi.

<sup>1</sup>

"Richard Rohr, *On the Threshold of Transformation: Daily Meditations for Men* (Chicago: Loyola Press, 2010), p. 374.