

Epiphany 2019

"The Lord rescues the poor when they cry out and the afflicted ones when they have no one to help them."

*"Star of wonder, star of might, star with royal beauty bright.
Westward leading, still proceeding, guide us with thy perfect light."*

What is an Epiphany?

Epiphany means "Manifestation of God." It traditionally refers to the visit by the three kings - the Magi - to Bethlehem, led by a star. This Epiphany story symbolizes the whole world coming to Christ, that Christ died for everyone, Jews and Christians alike.

There are many such epiphany stories in the Old Testament: the crossing of the Reed Sea, the pillar of fire and column of smoke leading the Israelites through the desert, the virgin birth of Jesus, the star over Bethlehem, the transfiguration of Jesus, his resurrection.

Epiphanies - suddenly becoming aware of God present in our lives - didn't just happen during ancient times, they are still happening now, and for those who pay attention, they are happening all the time. Some Epiphanies are up-lifting and encouraging, others may not be so welcomed.

A current example of an Epiphany - of suddenly becoming aware of God's presence - is a letter written by Pope Francis to the American bishops about the damage they caused the Church in their cover-up of clergy abuse. It is in the current issue of the NCR, January 3, 2019. It is titled, "*Pope Francis takes US bishops to task for cover-up, conflict, division*". This could not have been easy for the bishops to hear. This article summarizes that Epiphany.

"In a strongly worded, eight-page [letter to U.S. bishops](#), Pope Francis has rebuked the prelates not only for covering up sexual abuse but for unhealthy conflicts and divisions among themselves, which have 'gravely' and 'seriously' undercut the church's credibility. The bishops are gathered Jan. 2-8 for a weeklong retreat which the pope had [requested](#) as part of the bishops' response to clergy sexual abuse.

"Francis says it will require humility to restore trust, not self-centeredness, competition, reclaiming lost prestige or to seek accolades. Their failure to respond as a unified body, and the debate in the church around this issue has degenerated into typical 'culture war' fights. He wrote, Let us try to break the vicious circle of recrimination, undercutting and discrediting, by avoiding gossip and slander in the pursuit of a path of prayerful acceptance of our limitations and sins.

"Lost credibility cannot be regained by issuing stern decrees or by simply creating new committees or improving flow charts. Instead, he urges the bishops to enter into affective

communion with our people. That, he said, will liberate us from the quest of false, facile and futile forms of triumphalism. This will aid in the search for suitable measures free of false premises or rigid formulations no longer capable of speaking to or stirring the hearts of men and women in our time.

"Francis said reconciliation will come only 'if we can stop projecting onto others our own confusion and discontent, which are obstacles to unity, and dare to come together, on our knees, before the Lord and let ourselves be challenged by his wounds. This call to conversion of mind and hearts is what Jesus was calling his bickering disciples to for seeking privileged positions for themselves in the new kingdom.'" The end of the article.

This letter by Francis to the bishops must be stinging. It is an Epiphany for them, and it cannot be easy, for the conversion of heart it is calling them to is the same conversion of heart it is calling us to.

Epiphanies do not just appear in the religious realm, they occur in every category of life: social, economic, religious, and yes - political. We hear about "Identity Politics." To my understanding, Identity Politics has something to do with self-identification with personal preferences and interests, justified up by selective self-serving belief systems. None of this is foreign to me. I can recognize how often my certainties about something were directly related to my preferences and self-interest.

Franciscan Fr. Richard Rohr observes, "*We cannot understand anything well once we have approved or disapproved of it. There is too much of us invested there.*" Isn't it often true that what we believe to be true is really what we want to be true, not only in our personal lives, but also in our social, economic, religious, and yes - political lives.

This isn't just a function of bigotry and narrow-mindedness. We are told there is a physiological basis for self interest and preference. Changing our patterns of thinking and behavior challenges our neurological wiring, and it feels uncomfortable when we have to break the bond of our familiar wiring, our chemical structure in order to create new wiring. Our software needs to be upgraded to meet the new demands we want to see in our lives; we need new neurological wiring to conduct new preferences and interests.

The work of Epiphany is to disengage us from all debilitating fear, hurt and anger; it is to disrupt in us the obsessive desire for material possessions; it is to dismantle in us all forms of religious intolerance towards people, objects, and events; it is to disentangle us from any and all political corruption. Especially, the work of Epiphany is to dislodge from ourselves any sense of moral superiority over those whom we have just described; we don't first look around to see in

which person, policy or political party these disfunctions are found, we first need to look within ourselves. It is here where the Star first shines.

The work of Epiphany expands our hearts and minds and emotions to embrace each other in a larger beauty and love whom we call God. The star took the Magi to places they never dreamed of, and it changed the world. Imagine what could happen for our world if we followed that star that is still trying to get us to follow.

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Happy Epiphany Everyone!