

**Solemnity of the Epiphany
St. Raymond Church
Raymond, Illinois
January 8, 2011**

**† Most Rev. Thomas John Paprocki
Bishop of Springfield in Illinois**

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ:

As Bishop of the Diocese of Springfield in Illinois, it is a privilege for me to celebrate and preach at this Mass with you today. Usually when a bishop comes to a parish, it is a special occasion, like administering the Sacrament of Confirmation, celebrating a parish jubilee, or installing a new pastor. I am not here for any of those reasons today. I am here for a regular weekend/Sunday Mass because I want at some time to visit every parish in our diocese, in order to get to know the people and the places that make up our Catholic community in central Illinois.

What does a bishop look for when he comes to a parish? Well, I didn't come to see if the floors were cleaned and the pews were polished! I take my cue from the Gospel passage where Jesus asks, "When the Son of Man comes, will He find faith on the earth?" (Luke 18:8). First and foremost, when a bishop comes to a parish, he looks for the presence of the

Catholic **faith**, to see whether it is strong and vibrant, whether it is growing, and if the conditions are present for its continued growth in the future.

At the same time, a pastoral visit is not just a time for a bishop to see the parish, but also for the parish to see the bishop. The Church is all about relationships. As the three persons of the Trinity are an intimate communion of Father, Son and Spirit in relationship to each other, the Church exists as a communion in relationship to God and in relation to each other, the People of God, the Body of Christ. As a bishop, I have a special relationship with you, and you have a special relationship with me, and one of my roles is to bridge the relationship between you and the Pope and the rest of the universal Church, so that we may all be one in Christ's Body.

But this "special relationship" is not just about recognizing each other's faces and knowing one another's names and titles. In the Church, we call this relationship a *communio*, that is, the communion of those belonging to the Body of Christ, the Church, which the Second Vatican Council, in the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium* (14), describes as follows: "Fully incorporated into the Church are those who,

possessing the Spirit of Christ, accept all the means of salvation given to the Church together with her entire organization, and who – by the bonds constituted by the profession of faith, the sacraments, ecclesial government, and communities – are joined in the visible structure of the Church of Christ, who rules her through the Supreme Pontiff and the bishops.” Thus, to remain in this authentic *communio*, we can never see ourselves as somehow “independent” or act apart from the universal Church or even the local Church, or else we cease to be truly Catholic.

Today the Church celebrates the Solemnity of the Epiphany. At King’s College, in Cambridge, England, on the east wall of the chapel, behind the altar, there hangs a great painting by Peter Paul Rubens. It is *The Adoration of the Magi*. Three travelers from the east have journeyed far to look for the “infant king of the Jews”. The Christmas story, as told by Matthew, gives us this great feast that we celebrate today – the Epiphany, that is, the revealing of Christ to the peoples of the whole world.

In St Matthew’s Gospel we meet the powerful political figure of King Herod. This man displays all the force and fallibility of any human leader. Once in power, his main objective seems to be to stay in power. Power that could be used to help humankind can easily become corrupted into a force

for destroying humankind. Herod's wrongdoing has certainly made him so self-obsessed that he even fears the birth of a child as some kind of threat to his own throne.

In Jerusalem, Herod's advisors, the religious and political elite, gather to discuss the political situation. These people are experts on how to manage things, so as not to rock the boat. They seem to know what they are talking about. They know *where* the Messiah will be born. But they don't seem to be very interested in *when*, as long as it does not upset their routines of control. These people enjoy their position and their work, but they are not interested in the wider world.

The travelers, however, are very interested in the wider world. They are seekers after wisdom. They look for the meaning of things. They do not settle down in the comfort of the here and now. Their life is a journey, and they seek answers to life's great questions. When they find a "lowly cattle shed," they fall on their knees in homage to a child. All their searching and all their studying has brought them to this place, and to this newborn king. Today's feast invites us to join the Magi, and to become wise travelers through this world. It is a great temptation, in our lives, to become like Herod, little demagogues in our own world, ruling our lives according to

our own desires. We can also be tempted to become political and religious experts, like Herod's advisors, putting the world to rights according to our own theories of who's right and who's wrong, and never getting beyond argument.

Alternatively, we can go on the journey, like the wise men of old, and look for the child, and adore when we find him. When we accept this challenge, then, for as long as we are on this Earth, we are on the journey. St Peter, who spent many a day in the Lord's company, was never finished with learning. There is always so much to discover. "The truth I have now come to realize," Peter said on one famous occasion, "is that God does not have favorites, but that anybody of any nationality who fears God and does what is right is acceptable to him."

Another great disciple, Blessed John Henry Newman, the English convert and cardinal, in an Anglican sermon for the Epiphany in 1839, said, "When men understand what each other mean, they see, for the most part, that controversy is either superfluous or hopeless." This is the challenge of today's feast – that we go out and embrace the world.

In this Eucharistic liturgy, we experience Jesus as the light for our hearts and the one who lifts the burdens of our sins from our shoulders. As

we approach Christ in communion at every Mass, you and I can truly say that we who walked in darkness have seen a great light. May our gathering around this altar and our celebration of the Eucharist always fill us with an awareness of the grace and peace that comes to us from God our Father through the Lord Jesus Christ.

May God give us this grace. Amen.