

**Homily for Parish Pastoral Visit  
Solemnity of the Epiphany  
Holy Family Church  
Athens, Illinois  
January 5, 2020**

**† 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 good to be with you to celebrate this Mass today. Usually when a bishop visits, it is a special occasion, like administering the Sacrament of Confirmation or celebrating a jubilee marking a significant anniversary of a church or parish. I am not here for any of those reasons today. I am here for this Sunday Mass simply for a parish pastoral visit. I say, “simply,” but of course it is no simple matter when a bishop, as a successor of the Apostles, comes to a parish, even if it is for a routine visit.

What does a bishop look for when he comes for a pastoral visit? 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 faithful, but also for the faithful 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.

It particular, it is good to be here just one week after the Solemnity of the Holy Family, your parish feast day. Of course, the Solemnity of the Holy Family celebrates the relationship of Jesus, Mary and Joseph, but by virtue of our baptism, we are adopted into this Holy Family, and so we too have a special relationship with Jesus, Our Savior, with His Blessed Mother, and her most chaste spouse, Saint Joseph. Our adoption into this Holy Family also makes us brothers and sisters in Christ, and so we should live with one another and treat each other accordingly.

Today the Church continues to observe the Christmas season as we celebrate 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, ruling our lives according to our own desires. We can also be tempted to become political and religious experts, like Herod's advisors, viewing the world 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. Saint John Henry Newman, the English convert and Cardinal who was

recently canonized a saint, in a 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 the Middle Ages, Saint Francis of Assisi invented the Christmas crib, in which the individuals who figure in the story of Jesus’ birth are presented so that people could reflect on this mystery, this particular moment of God’s reaching out to humanity in the person of Jesus.

When the Epiphany narrative is depicted in the crib, there is usually a trio of royal figures. In many Christmas Nativity displays, we see one figure portrayed as African, the second as Asian, the third as Caucasian or European. All races and nationalities are suggested as being present: everyone is included in the revealing of the Christ child in our world. The three gifts which the magi offer have important symbolic meanings: the gold symbolises Jesus being a king, incense points to our prayers rising up to heaven, symbolizing that Jesus is God, and myrrh foreshadows Christ’s burial after the crucifixion.

Our celebration of the Epiphany challenges us to share the joy of the Gospel with people we meet. Maybe we can help a friend to find new

meaning in life. Perhaps we may have a new desire to speak of our faith in Jesus Christ as members of His Holy Family. Maybe we are more ready to love in a difficult situation. The Epiphany invites us to find a new path and a new route as we begin this new year. The Gospel message calls us to be more open to people who are fragile and vulnerable, weak and poor, and in this way share our hope and joy with others.

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 Holy Communion, 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.