

# RCIA

## RCIA HO class 14-15 Christmas and Epiphany

While the Feast of the Epiphany has been traditionally celebrated on January 6<sup>th</sup> (thus completing the course of the Twelve Days of Christmas), it is in our day celebrated on the Sunday nearest January 6<sup>th</sup>. The Feast of the Epiphany is a very ancient one, and it seems that the Nativity of the Lord was celebrated on this date for several centuries until a decree of the Holy See in the year 376 obliged all churches to celebrate Christmas on December 25<sup>th</sup>.

The word *Epiphany* comes from the Greek meaning “a manifestation” or “apparition”. Another Greek term used to describe God’s showing Himself to His creatures, or appearing to His creatures, is *Theophany*, meaning a manifestation of God.

Tradition has it that three *theophanies* or *epiphanies* took place on January 6: 1) God’s showing Himself to the world, via the Magi, in the Person of the baby Jesus in the manger at Bethlehem (Luke 2:1ff.); 2) the Baptism of the Lord in the Jordan when the voice of the Father is heard saying, “This is my Beloved Son” (Luke 4:21ff., et al.); and 3) the changing of water into wine at the wedding feast at Cana (John 2:1ff.). In all three cases God is showing Himself to the world in the Person of Jesus Christ or showing that Jesus Christ is God.

The visit of the Magi, or Three Kings, is the event we normally associate with the Epiphany, or Three Kings’ Day (Matthew 2:1ff.). There are several lessons we may glean from the account of the visit. First, the Magi were looking for the Messiah. As astronomers (of a primitive sort) they were attentive to the movements of the heavens, and as astrologers (of an innocent sort) they were expecting a great event associated with the movements of the heavens at the time of the birth of our Lord. In other words, they found the Child because they were looking for Him.

Secondly, “on entering the house they prostrated themselves [knelt or lay down in worship] and did Him homage”. In other words, they recognized that the Child was God; else they would not have “worshiped” Him. Thirdly, the Magi brought the Child gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. The biblical text does not indicate how many Magi there were. We refer to them as three since there were three gifts, but a longstanding extra-biblical tradition provides us three names:

Caspar, Balthasar, and Melchior. The three gifts have taken on a symbolic significance. Gold only possessed by the very wealthy (such as kings) at the time of Christ symbolizes Christ’s **Kingship** over all of creation. Frankincense (a particular type of incense) was only used in divine worship at the time of Christ and symbolizes His **divinity**. Myrrh, a resin from various plants, was used for the embalming of bodies after death. Thus, myrrh calls to mind the fact that Christ would suffer and die in His **humanity**.

While there is no hard evidence to support the tradition that all three theophanies actually took place on January 6<sup>th</sup>, there is likewise no evidence to disprove that ancient tradition. (CF Lagrange, *The Liturgical Year*, vol. 3, pp. 107ff.)

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### *RCIA WKSH Classes 14-15 Christmas and Epiphany*

- 1) In what town was Jesus born?
- 2) What does the name of that town mean?
- 3) Why do you think God arranged things in such a way that Jesus would be born in a town with that name?
- 4) What did God mean to tell us by allowing Jesus to be born in a manger, which is a food box for animals?
- 5) Why was there no room for Mary and Joseph in the inn?
- 6) What is the song that the angels sang at Jesus' birth that we sing at Mass?
- 7) How did the Three Kings find Jesus?
- 8) Why did they want to find Him?
- 9) What are the three gifts that they brought Him, and what do they symbolize?
- 10) What did the Three Kings do when they found Jesus? (see MT chapter 2)