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Solemnity of the Epiphany

This day the Church remembers the visit of the magi from the East. The magi were not necessarily kings, and not magicians. They were wise men who may have been from the priestly caste in Persia. Anyway, they brought gold, frankincense, and myrrh as gifts. These gifts have some relation to the worship of God: frankincense is a high-quality incense, used in worship throughout the Middle East. Myrrh is also used with incense, and Moses used it in relation to the ordination of priests. Myrrh was also used in healing remedies, and in the Lord's burial, although in the context of the gift of the magi, it may have been related to ordination and worship ceremonies. So, these gifts were related to the recognition of Jesus as Lord; the magi came to do the Lord Jesus homage.

What I want to focus upon is the gold. The gold which the magi brought is an interesting story. The psalm for the Solemnity of the Epiphany states, "Lord, every nation on earth will adore you." There is a kind of irony in this. Many, although not all, nations on earth had attacked or tried to destroy the Chosen People. The Egyptians enslaved the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, as related in the Book of Exodus. After the Exodus, the Philistines and various peoples attacked the Israelites when they settled in the Holy Land.

The Assyrians were friendly to King David's descendants, but they betrayed the kings, and destroyed ten of the twelve tribes. Eventually, God rescued His people during the time of King Hezekiah. The Babylonians were initially friendly to David's descendants, but they too betrayed the kings. They destroyed the city of Jerusalem and the Temple of Solomon.

The Persians came next, but they were generally friendly towards the Jews. Alexander the Great came, and the generals who succeeded him tried to impose the Greek religion upon the Jewish people. The Jewish people revolted under the leadership of Judah Maccabee, and they won a brief independence, until the Roman legions came to conquer.

Some of those who attacked the Israelites went so far as to loot the Temple. Shishak, an Egyptian pharaoh, attacked Jerusalem after the death of King Solomon, and raided the Temple, taking several gold items that King Solomon had commissioned. The Babylonians raided the Temple before destroying it, although they did not take the Ark of the Covenant. King Belshazzar famously drank from the vessels that his father Nebuchadnezzar had taken from the

Temple. As recounted in the Book of the Prophet Daniel, God sent a hand to write on the wall of the king's palace, which spelled his imminent death and put an end to his kingdom.

King Cyrus of Persia allowed some of the vessels to return to the Temple. The Greek invaders under King Antiochus raided the Temple and took the gold and silver items. They even went so far as to erect a statue of Zeus in the Temple of Jerusalem. Eventually, Judah Maccabee and his brothers rededicated the Temple, which is commemorated at Hannukah. The Roman legions would later take several gold items from the Temple after they destroyed Jerusalem.

The magi bringing gold to the Infant Jesus is significant, since many nations had taken gold from the Temple in Jerusalem. There is a way in which the nations were giving back to God what belonged to God, and making a kind of restitution. The nations adoring the Lord through the persons of these magi is a kind of reversal of centuries of antagonism that the Chosen People endured from the nations around them.

King Solomon intended the Temple in Jerusalem to be a house of prayer for all people, and all nations. This vision had initial success, but the nations eventually did not feel the same way. The Church in our times is a place where people can find a home and where all nations can come to adore the Lord. That does not mean that everyone looks at the Church that way.

How does this impact us? The nations that were initially hostile to the Chosen People came to pay homage to the Lord in the persons of these wise men. There can be people in our lives who are hostile to us, hostile to the Church, hostile to God. Conversions happen in ways that we do not always understand, and so we need the strength to pray for those who have hurt us, or have been alienated from us. It is not easy, which is why we need God's strength.

When it comes to paying our homage to God, we can only give to God from what He has given to us. All things come from God, and we repay the Lord for His kindness to us. In addition to treasure, the Lord has provided us with time and talent. We give to God and to the Church the time and talent that God has given to us.

As we approach the altar, we ask the Lord to show us His kindness once more. We might see in the visit of the magi a kind of reconciliation of the nations with God and His Chosen People. If the nations can be reconciled to God, certainly people can too. We pray that this reconciliation will happen in the Church in our time. We come to the Lord, and we bring to Him what we have, which is more than just money. We use the talents and gifts that the Lord has given to us, and we come to adore the Lord.