

EPIPHANY – January 2, 2011
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Now that we have begun this new year of 2011, the beginning of the second decade of this 21st century, I want to wish all of you a very happy and blessed new year. 2010 certainly flew by in record time (or so it seems); I've even heard that from some young people and not just from us older folks. But I do pray that God's grace will be with you in a special way in this new year.

Having said that, we continue to celebrate the mystery and joy of this Christmas season. We have remembered with joy Jesus' birth at Bethlehem, the fact that he grew up in a family and that Mary can be called the Mother of God since her Son is true God as well as true man. And today, on this feast of Epiphany, we remember with joy how this infant was manifested as Savior of the whole world and not of just one nation or race. For centuries the Jewish people—the chosen people of God—had looked forward to the Messiah and Savior promised by God through the prophets. And now the Promised One has come...but he is also adored by the gentile or pagan world as represented by those magi who came from the east. Even the Old Testament scriptures indicated that this Messiah would be for all people: Isaiah in our first reading, writing centuries before the time of Christ, prophesied that nations would walk by the Promised One's light and kings by his radiance. In our responsorial psalm taken from Psalm 72 (long considered one of the messianic psalms looking forward to the Messiah), we heard "All kings shall pay him homage, all nations shall serve him."

And when Jesus grew up and engaged in his public ministry, he made it clear through his words and actions that he came to be Savior of all people. Obviously he spent much time and effort among his own Jewish community. But he was not afraid to proclaim the kingdom of God and serve others as well—remember, for example, how Jesus cured the son of the Roman centurion and how he regularly associated with those considered unworthy by the leaders. At the Last Supper Jesus made it clear that he came to be Savior of all: "I am the way, the truth and the life—no one comes to the Father except through me."

After Jesus' resurrection and ascension into heaven, the first preachers of the gospel repeated that same message. Thus, for example, St. Paul affirms in our second reading that in Christ, the Gentiles are now co-heirs with the Chosen People to the promises and mercy of God, joined together with Israel as co-partners of Jesus' promise through the gospel. And as our present Catechism says: "The Epiphany shows that that in Christ 'the full number of the nations' now takes its 'place in the family of the patriarchs, and...(are made worthy of the heritage of Israel.)'"

So Jesus came to be the Savior of all the world and all peoples and he desires that all people would be one in him. That is why he established the one Church that would later be called 'catholic'—a word meaning 'universal,' intended to embrace everyone everywhere. So what does this mean, then, for those many people and many nations who do not know or who do not accept Jesus as Lord, Son of God and Savior? In recent years and especially since the Second Vatican Council in the 1960's, the Church has restated her commitment to the truth, based on Jesus' own words, that the whole human race is called to be the one People of God in the one Church of Jesus Christ.

That unity is obviously not complete at this time—human frailty, lack of knowledge, sin and pride have led to many misunderstandings, divisions, and even to the scandal of violence done in the name of God at different times in history, including (sadly) our own. But as the Church continues to affirm that Jesus is the one Savior of humanity, she also affirms the respect we are to give to those of other faiths. We assuredly love and respect our brothers and sisters in other Christian denominations, even if we are not in full communion with them because of various doctrinal differences. We rejoice in our common belief in the God of the Trinity, in Jesus the God-Man as Savior, and the importance of the Bible and of our common baptism.

But we are also connected to those who do not know Christ; they are also part of the People of God in different ways. The Church affirmed at Vatican II that “those who, through no fault of their own, do not know the Gospel of Christ or his Church, but who nevertheless seek God with a sincere heart and . . . try . . . to do his will as they know it through . . . their conscience—those too may achieve eternal salvation.” Special mention is then given to particular religions, Judaism being the first and most important since it was the Jewish people who were the first to receive God’s revealed word through Abraham, Moses, and all the others. We also have a special connection to Moslems, the followers of Islam who also worship the one true God and who also claim Abraham as their father in faith—even if we would differ fundamentally with them about the centrality and divinity of Jesus Christ.

Regarding these and other great world religions like Buddhism and Hinduism, the Church respects them deeply and acknowledges within them whatever is good and true. But the Church also and clearly affirms that whatever is good and true in those religions finds its ultimate foundation in Jesus Christ who is the fullness and the perfection of God’s revelation and the one and only path to eternal life—as Jesus himself affirmed. The Church loves and highly esteems our non-Christian friends; in recent years, Pope John Paul II and Pope Benedict have reached out to and visited with many of those faiths and with their leaders in order to demonstrate that love and respect. Likewise, the Church affirms that they can also come to eternal salvation. To the extent that happens, they are saved through the redemptive work of Jesus Christ and by means of the Church he established and to which he gave the fullness of the means of salvation . . . all of which happens in ways fully known to God alone.

So we return to the gospel and to those magi, those wise men who indeed represent all of us, the whole human race. In them we rediscover and are reminded again of the great truth that God sent his Son to save the whole world and that salvation and eternal joy in heaven is offered to everyone and is given to those who respond to this most amazing grace. The Church takes seriously her sacred obligation to pray and work for the unity of all people in the person of Jesus Christ, and each of us is called to share in that sacred responsibility. And so let us join those very wise men and continue to adore and follow Jesus the Christ.