

EPIPHANY – January 8, 2012
(175th anniversary of Dubuque Archdiocese; evangelization)
Fr. Jerry Kopacek

As we draw near to the end of another Christmas season, we celebrate today the feast of the Lord's Epiphany—the manifestation or appearance of the newborn Jesus as Savior of the whole world. This comes through loud and clear in the familiar story of the magi, those wise men from the east who followed the light of that unique star until they found the holy Child. And the fact of their journey is an important part of this story. The magi were not locals—they came from a distant land. In fact, we might call them the first Christian pilgrims—being willing to endure much inconvenience and hardship through great distances for the sake of reaching their goal: finding Jesus the Christ. Remember that this was at a time when traveling on land meant walking or riding beasts of burden—no air-conditioned cars or SUVs, no trains, not even a bicycle.

So much of Christian history in general and the life of Christian discipleship in particular is about travel and the journey. Sometimes that does mean actual movement from one place to another. In this 175th anniversary year of the Archdiocese of Dubuque we are remembering with thanks to God the origins of our local church and how we have grown since it was established back in 1837. I am almost done reading the new 175th anniversary history of our diocese...and if you are wondering if this is another commercial for this book, you are absolutely correct! Seriously, it is a very compelling story with lots of fascinating tidbits:

1. Our founding bishop, Matthias Loras, was born in Lyons, France in 1792, the youngest of ten children; very soon thereafter, his father was killed by the anti-Catholic forces of the French Revolution. After ordination to the priesthood, he wanted to do mission work in America. He was eventually named bishop of the brand new diocese of Dubuque in 1837—basically the northern half of the Louisiana Purchase (if you remember your U.S. history), and before Iowa and Minnesota had even been named as states. Loras did not arrive in his new diocese, however, until 1839—two years later—because he first went back to Europe to try to recruit priests and raise money to establish this new local church. In his years as bishop until his death in 1858, he also brought many religious women to the diocese who were active in education and other fields.

2. In those first several decades of our diocesan history, local settlements of Catholics were served by priests who were definitely circuit riders—traveling by horseback or by river from place to place to offer the sacraments wherever and whenever they could, often in people's homes. It was not until later that many more churches were built (often little more than log cabins) and parishes were established that had resident pastors. It was interesting to read how the first Catholic church in Sherrill (north of Dubuque) was built in the 1850's for the grand sum of \$96.93—slightly less than what we are trying to raise in our CVCS capital campaign... In the years before the Springbrook parish was established south of Bellevue, a missionary priest would come for Mass—and that would be made known to the locals by firing off a cannon. You will be relieved to know that I will not be reviving that custom here at St. Ed's!

3. Speaking of pastors, it was also very interesting to see how long some of those pastors remained at parishes. As you know, our current practice is for pastors to be named for a term of six years with a possible second six-year term depending on various circumstances. In the past, however, there were no such specific terms. One priest in the Lansing parish in the northeast corner of our diocese, Fr. George Haxmeier, served there as pastor for 62 years, retiring in 1942. That is longer than I have been alive! Or consider a parish much closer to home—I.C. in Gilbertville. Their first formal pastor was Fr. John Nemmers, ordained to the priesthood in 1875 and named pastor that very same day. He served there as pastor until his death in 1928—53 years later. The next pastor, Fr. William Cremer, served for 37 years

until 1965. So in the first 90 years of the life of the Gilbertville parish, they were served by a grand total of two pastors. Simply amazing....

There is a whole lot more of such fascinating information in this book; they are available at the parish center during regular office hours (Mon.-Fri., 8 a.m. – 4 p.m.): \$30 for the hardcover, and \$5 for the young people's version. We will also have them available for sale in the church hall after Mass today like we did a few weeks ago. At that time some folks wanted me to sign the book; even though I'm not the author, I was glad to do so and will be glad to do so today as well—and we don't even charge extra for that. Such a deal! But I really do encourage you to get a copy if you have not already done so; it was very well done and truly interesting.

But the Archdiocese of Dubuque is doing more in this 175th jubilee year than simply looking back and remembering our history, important as that is. We are also using this occasion to look forward and ask ourselves: where are we going as the Church of Dubuque? As the wise men journeyed to Jesus twenty centuries ago, how are we called to follow in their footsteps? How do we build on the legacy of Bishop Loras and all those other pioneer bishops, priests, religious and laity who established the Catholic Church and faith in this part of the world? On a more formal level, I can tell you that Archbishop Hanus is wanting us to renew and strengthen our efforts at evangelization—witnessing our faith to others by our words and deeds and by how we present ourselves to others in our own little corner of the world. The chancery certainly has some ideas, but we can't just say: “evangelization is Dubuque's job” as if we have no role. Witnessing to Christ and to the truth and beauty of our Catholic faith is a task we all share—in various ways, to be sure, but it belongs to all of us.

This does not mean that we all have to have theology degrees or have memorized the entire Bible and Catechism. Recently Pope Benedict spoke on how our faith is effectively spread: “Faith grows when it is lived as an experience of love received and when it is communicated as an experience of grace and joy.” Perhaps we need to begin by asking ourselves: do I see my faith in Jesus and my place in his Church as genuine grace and blessing which I embrace with gratitude (even if sometimes with difficulty as well)? Or do I see that faith only as a set of rules and restrictions that I resent? Do others see me as a person of joy and peace that would make them curious about where that joy and peace come from? Or do others see in me only pride, constant complaining or a smugness that would lead them to say “well, if that's what being Catholic is, then I don't want any part of it!” The truth is: we evangelize others, we witness to others all the time—whether we are aware of it or not. The question then becomes: just what is it that we are witnessing to others? Do our words, deeds, and lives lead others to Christ or away from Christ in their journey through life?

Part of that 175th anniversary prayer that we began using today is especially on target regarding this whole subject: “Loving God...Open our hearts to Jesus. Give us the courage to speak His name to those who are close to us and the generosity to share His love with those who are far away.” As we follow the wise men on their journey to Jesus, as we journey through this jubilee year as the Archdiocese of Dubuque, let's all take that prayer to heart and live it out with genuine conviction and joy.

