

POPE FRANCIS ON EPIPHANY: DON'T GET STUCK IN A SPIRITUAL PARKING LOT—FAITH IS ALWAYS MOVING FORWARD

BY POPE FRANCIS

The Magi travel towards Bethlehem. Their pilgrimage speaks also to us, who are called to journey towards Jesus, for he is the North Star that lights up the sky of life and guides our steps towards true joy. Yet where did the Magi's pilgrimage to encounter Jesus begin? What made these men of the East set out on their journey?

They had excellent reasons not to depart. They were wise men and astrologers, famous and wealthy. Having attained sufficient cultural, social and economic security, they could have remained content with what they already knew and possessed. Instead, they let themselves be unsettled by a question and by a sign: "Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we have seen his star..." (Mt 2:2).

They did not allow their hearts to retreat into the caves of gloom and apathy; they longed to see the light. They were not content to plod through life, but yearned for new and greater horizons. Their eyes were not fixed here below; they were windows open to the heavens. As Benedict XVI said, the Magi were "men with a restless heart.... They were filled with expectation, not satisfied with their secure income and their respectable place in society.... They were seekers after God."

Where did it originate, this spirit of healthy restlessness that led them to set out on their journey? It was born of desire. That was their secret: the capacity to desire. Let us think about this. To desire means to fuel the fire that burns within us; it drives us to look beyond what is immediate and visible. To desire means embracing life as a mystery that surpasses us, as an ever-present cranny in the wall that beckons us to look into the distance, since life is not just our here and now, but something much greater.

It is like a blank canvas that cries out for color. A great painter, Vincent Van Gogh, once said that his need for God drove him to go outside at night to paint the stars. For that is the way God made us: brimming with desire, directed, like the Magi, towards the stars. With no exaggeration, we can say that we are what we desire. For it is our desires that enlarge our gaze and drive our lives forward, beyond the barriers of habit, beyond banal consumerism, beyond



a drab and dreary faith, beyond the fear of becoming involved and serving others and the common good. In the words of St. Augustine, "our entire life is an exercise of holy desire" (Homily on the First Letter of John, IV, 6).

Brothers and sisters, as it was for the Magi, so it is for us. The journey of life and faith demands a deep desire and inner zeal. Sometimes we live in a spirit of a "parking lot"; we stay parked, without the impulse of desire that carries us forward. We do well to ask: where are we on our journey of faith? Have we been stuck all too long, nestled inside a conventional, external and formal religiosity that no longer warms our hearts and changes our lives? Do our words and our liturgies ignite in people's hearts a desire to move towards God, or are they a "dead language" that speaks only of itself and to itself?

It is sad when a community of believers loses its desire and is content with "maintenance" rather than allowing itself to be startled by Jesus and by the explosive and unsettling joy of the Gospel. It is sad when a priest has closed the door of desire, sad to fall into clerical functionalism, very sad.

The crisis of faith in our lives and in our societies also has to do with the eclipse of desire for God. It is related to a kind of slumbering of the spirit, to the habit of being content to live from day to day, without ever asking what God really wants from us. We peer over earthly maps, but forget to look up to heaven. We are sated with plenty of things, but fail to hunger for our absent desire for God. We are fixated on our own needs, on what we will eat and wear (cf. Mt 6:25), even as we let the longing for greater things evaporate.

And we find ourselves living in communities that crave everything, have everything, yet all too often feel nothing but emptiness in their hearts: closed communities of

individuals, bishops, priests, or consecrated men and women. Indeed the lack of desire leads only to sadness and indifference, to sad communities, sad priests or bishops.

Let us look first to ourselves and ask: How is the journey of my faith going? This is a question that we can ask ourselves today, each one of us. How is the journey of my faith going? Is it parked or is it on the move? Faith, if it is to grow, has to begin ever anew. It needs to be sparked by desire, to take up the challenge of entering into a living and lively relationship with God. Does my heart still burn with desire for God? Or have I allowed force of habit and my own disappointments to extinguish that flame?

Today, brothers and sisters, is the day we should ask these questions. Today is the day we should return to nurturing our desire. How do we do this? Let us go to the Magi and learn from their “school of desire.” They will teach us in their school of desire. Let us look at the steps they took, and draw some lessons from them.

In the first place, they set out at the rising of the star. The Magi teach us that we need to set out anew each day, in life as in faith, for faith is not a suit of armor that encases us; instead, it is a fascinating journey, a constant and restless movement, ever in search of God, always discerning our way forward.

Then, in Jerusalem the Magi ask questions: They inquire where the Child is to be found. They teach us that we need to question. We need to listen carefully to the questions of our heart and our conscience, for it is there that God often speaks to us. He addresses us more with questions than with answers. We must learn this well: God addresses us more with questions than with answers. Yet let us also be unsettled by the questions of our children, and by the doubts, hopes and desires of the men and women of our time. We need to entertain questions.

The Magi then defy Herod. They teach us that we need a courageous faith, one that is unafraid to challenge the sinister logic of power, and become seeds of justice and fraternity in societies where in our day modern Herods continue to sow death and slaughter the poor and innocent, amid general indifference.

Finally, the Magi return “by another way” (Mt 2:12). They challenge us to take new paths. Here we see the creativity of the Spirit who always brings out new things.

That is also one of the tasks of the Synod we are currently undertaking: to journey together and to listen to one another, so that the Spirit can suggest to us new ways and paths to bring the Gospel to the hearts of those who are distant, indifferent or without hope, yet continue to seek what the Magi found: “a great joy” (Mt 2:10). We must always move forwards.

At the end of the Magi’s journey came the climactic moment: once they arrived at their destination, “they fell down and worshiped the Child” (cf. v. 11). They worshiped. Let us never forget this: the journey of faith finds renewed strength and fulfillment only when it is made in the presence of God. Only if we recover our “taste” for adoration will our desire be rekindled. Desire leads us to adoration and adoration renews our desire. For our desire for God can only grow when we place ourselves in his presence. For Jesus alone heals our desires. From what? From the tyranny of needs.

Indeed, our hearts grow sickly whenever our desires coincide merely with our needs. God, on the other hand, elevates our desires; he purifies them and heals them of selfishness, opening them to love for him and for our brothers and sisters. This is why we should not neglect adoration, that prayer of silent adoration which is not so common among us. Please let us not forget adoration.

In this way, like the Magi, we will have the daily certainty that even in the darkest nights a star continues to shine. It is the star of the Lord, who comes to care for our frail humanity. Let us set out on the path towards him. Let us not give apathy and resignation the power to drive us into a cheerless and banal existence. Let our restless hearts embrace the restlessness of the Spirit.

The world expects from believers a new burst of enthusiasm for the things of heaven. Like the Magi, let us lift up our eyes, listen to the desire lodged in our hearts, and follow the star that God makes shine above us. As restless seekers, let us remain open to God’s surprises. Brothers and sisters, let us dream, let us seek and let us adore.

