

CHURCH STUFF

(A newsletter for Catholic cadets)

Week of 11 January, 2009

To my Catholic brothers and sisters in the Corps:

Welcome back!

Hope your Break was a good one and that you had a chance to relax and enjoy life a bit.

Being back at the grindstone may not be the most attractive option in the world, but if you look at it positively, it can be a chance to make a new BEGINNING.

The following prayer says it all:

O God!

Help me to believe in BEGINNINGS
and in my BEGINNING again.

I've known death and birth.
I've been brave and scared.
I've hurt, and I've helped.
I've been honest; I've lied.
I've destroyed; I've created.
I've been with people; I've been lonely.
I've been loyal; I've betrayed.
I've decided; I've waffled.
I've laughed, and I've cried.

You know my frail heart
and my frayed history.

Help me to believe in BEGINNINGS,
to make a new BEGINNING,
to be a BEGINNING,
so that I may not just grow OLD
but grow NEW,
NEW in this wild, amazing life
which You've called me to live...
with the BEGINNINGS that Jesus had.

Hope your BEGINNING of 2009 was a good one and that you can make a new BEGINNING every day of your lives.

DID YOU KNOW?

Well, last Sunday was the feast of the EPIPHANY (aka, "The Feast of the Three Kings").

You can read the story in Matthew 2:1-12.

And if you do, you'll notice that Matthew never mentions "kings" or the number "three".

All he said was that "magi" (astrologers) from the East discovered a newly-rising star and journeyed to Jerusalem to find the Messiah. The Jewish scholars directed them to Bethlehem (based on a prophecy by the Old Testament prophet Micah – 5:1-3), where they found Jesus and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh.

Then they left, and you never hear about them again.

So where did we get all the additional details?

And why is this feast celebrated on or around 6 January (sometimes called "Little Christmas")?

No one knows the exact reason, but there's evidence that in the East, the first days of January were kept as a kind of pagan "Winter Festival", commemorating the appearance of "Aion" (god of time and eternity) among the people.

The early Christians in the East decided to celebrate Christ's birth as a way of attracting attention to their belief in Jesus (as opposed to "Aion"). Evidence of this can be found as early as the 3rd century.

Eventually, their celebration found its way into Gaul (France) and came up against 25 December – which was already being celebrated as "Christmas" in Rome.

So the Church adopted both feasts, making 25 December a commemoration of Christ revealing himself to the Jewish people (as personified by the shepherds)...and making 6 January a commemoration of Christ revealing himself to the non-Jews (personified by the magi).

From that point on, EPIPHANY (the word is Greek, and it means a "showing" or an "appearance") grew in popularity.

A 3rd-century Christian writer – Origen – decided that since three gifts were mentioned in the Gospel story, there must have been three magi.

By the 6th century, the belief grew up that these guys were actually "kings" (that idea grew because of a literal interpretation of Psalm 72:10, which reads as follows:

The **KINGS** of Tarshish and the Isles
shall offer gifts;
The **KINGS** of Arabia and Seba
shall bring tribute...)

And by the 8th century, the Venerable Bede (an English Catholic monk-historian) was repeating the legend that the three "kings" had specific names and racial characteristics: Melchior was supposedly an old white man with a long white beard, and he bore the gift of gold; Caspar was a young man of darker color, and he brought the incense; and Balthasar was a black man who brought the gift of myrrh.

So these "kings" came to represent the three major races of humanity (according to the 8th-century interpretation).

In 1164, the German emperor Frederick Barbarossa dug up three graves in the cathedral of Milan – graves which had been venerated as the graves of early martyrs – and he moved the remains to the cathedral at Cologne, claiming that the bodies were those of the "three kings". People eventually bought into the story, and the tomb became the focus of pilgrimages. If you went there today, you could still see the monument in the cathedral.

In the 1200s, Marco Polo made his famous trip through Asia, and in his journal, he recorded arriving at a village in Persia where the villagers claimed that the original magi had lived in that village.

So the story has captured popular imagination throughout the centuries.

By the High Middle Ages, the Feast of EPIPHANY was being celebrated with much of the same intensity as Christmas. Gifts were exchanged, and feasting was held.

The German Catholics had a special cake called “Dreikoenigskuchen” (literally, “three kings’ cooking”), and the French Catholics had “gateaux des rois” (“cakes of the kings”). These were cakes into which a valuable ring was inserted. The person who got the piece of cake containing the ring was “king” for the day and allowed to keep the ring.

On EPIPHANY, there were plays and dramas at the cathedrals. These plays told the story of the “Three Kings” and actually became a part of the Mass. They were discontinued when they became too boisterous: the people who played King Herod (the villain) often went to great lengths to portray the evil king as demented, and there are stories of sanctuary furniture being broken up and spectators being attacked by these characters. The dramas were later moved outside the main doors of the cathedrals.

So the Feast of the EPIPHANY has a long and colorful history in Catholicism, but essentially, the real point of the story is about REVELATION: Christ revealing himself to Jewish people (represented by shepherds) and non-Jewish people (the magi), with the underlying message that “Christ is not just for a particular group of human beings; Christ is for EVERYONE”.

GOT A QUESTION?

Q: Father, I was wondering if you know how to prove there’s a God. I believe there is, but my friend does not, and he wants reasons that are not based on “faith”.

A: I don’t know if there are any human reasons for anything that aren’t based on a type of “faith”. Even the simplest actions demand a certain “faith”.

For example, when you consult a timetable to find out when trains go from Garrison to NYC, you’re operating on the “faith” that the timetable reflects the truth of the matter.

“Faith” is a normal daily part of human life.

I’m afraid that your friend is asking for the impossible.

When human beings talk about “proof” for something, they’re usually asking for something based on observable phenomena that can be judged according to scientific examination.

What we sometimes forget is that “science” refers to the material world and everything composed of matter. We’re familiar with these realities, and we understand them because we’re creatures of matter.

We forget that we’re also creatures of “spirit”, and there’s a part of our personalities that isn’t ruled by these same scientific principles. The world of the “spirit” is another level of our lives, and it’s where we encounter what I believe is the most powerful “evidence” for the existence of God.

So, there are no “proofs” from the world of science...not, at least, as I understand the word “proof”.

Belief in God is most convincingly based on one’s experience of God, and it’s quite possible that your friend has never had any such experience.

One can experience God directly – through God’s power moving through one’s personality – or one can experience God indirectly – through someone else.

In any case, unless one is open to the possibility, no experience of God will make any sense. It depends very heavily on one’s willingness to open his or her “spirit” to the “works of the spirit”. Many of us wouldn’t have any idea how to do that because we’re so heavily involved in the “world of matter”.

To one whose spirit is open, something as simple as sunrise speaks loudly of God.

To one whose spirit is open, the kindness of a stranger speaks loudly of God.

To one whose spirit is open, the miracle of new-born life speaks loudly of God.

It can’t be reduced to ‘scientific proof’, since the rules of the material world, which is confined to time and space, don’t apply to the “world of the spirit”.

For me, the most convincing argument for the existence of God is the fact that from the beginning of the human species, human beings have been conscious of the “need to believe”. They have experienced realities in their lives which no “scientific” discovery could ever explain. They tapped into the “spiritual” world.

True, most of our human concepts of God are flawed here and there – because human vocabulary can’t fully express the perfect nature of God – but that doesn’t take away the reality that lies at the base of the flawed concepts.

As the philosopher Wittgenstein put it in 1951:

Yes, the unspeakable exists. It manifests itself;
it is mystical reality...Even if all possible scientific
questions found their answer, the real problems
of life still remain untouched...The solution of the
riddle of life in time and space lies outside time
and space.

Hope this gives you something you can use in your discussion.

THEOLOGY EVERY CATHOLIC SHOULD KNOW:

ICONOCLASM:

Strictly speaking, it’s not a “theology” topic, I guess...but it’s based on a theological principle, so it works for me.

The word “iconoclasm” comes from a Greek word that means “image-breaking”, and an iconoclast is someone who goes around breaking images of things...like religious art and statues.

And this whole area deals with a specific period of Catholic Church history (mid-800s), when there was a significant minority in the Catholic world who believed that having images of Christ, Mary, and the saints was a direct violation of the Scriptures.

After all, Jewish tradition remembered the 1st Commandment as it was recorded both in Exodus (20:2-6) and in Deuteronomy (5:6-10):

I, the Lord, am your God who brought
you out of the land of Egypt, that place
of slavery. You shall not have other gods
besides me. You shall not carve idols
for yourselves in the shape of anything
in the sky above or on the earth below

or in the waters beneath the earth. You shall not bow down before them or worship them. For I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God...

Thus, for the Temple in Jerusalem and for every Jewish synagogue, the Jewish people were very strict about not having any representations that could be construed as “idols”... and in the early Church, those early believers preserved the Jewish concern that NO images be made...for fear of idolatry.

But as the Church began to spread into the Greco-Roman world, this attitude began to change. The Christian believers began to view ART as an aide to worship. ARTISTIC IMAGES were seen as sources of inspiration, and a person became initiated into the Christian mysteries not only through “hearing the word” but also through the eyes and through human sensibilities.

Hence, churches were constructed and decorated with works of art, and artists were employed to enhance the worship-settings by carvings, sculptures, paintings, etc., depicting Jesus, Mary and the saints...as well as scenes from Scripture.

Crucifixes, icons, statues, paintings, stained-glass windows became an expected part of both Eastern and Western church-building.

But in the mid-800s, there arose an “iconoclastic” tendency in the Greek-speaking Catholic world. Byzantine emperors began to think that representations of religious figures were a violation of the Old Testament prohibition, and they began to encourage the wholesale destruction of any and all artistic works in the Byzantine churches.

And so, crucifixes, statues, paintings, and anything that could remotely be interpreted as “idolatrous” were smashed, and this gave rise to the term “iconoclasm”.

It took a General Council of the Church – II Nicaea in 787 – to put a stop to the process of destruction. The bishops at the Council re-affirmed the value of VISUAL ART in worship, as long as it didn’t become an object of idolatry. Statues, etc., were restored, and their use – as an aid to the spiritual development of believers – was encouraged.

And it was this “restored” approach that gave rise to the great era of “cathedral-building” in Catholic history from the AD 300s to the Renaissance.

But with the beginning of the Protestant Reformation (1520s), ICONOCLASM once again became an issue in the Church, with the Protestant reformers bringing back the Old Testament interpretation of the 1st Commandment. They forbade any statues, crucifixes, paintings, etc., in their churches, claiming that they led to idolatry. Because of this belief, many treasured art-works from the medieval years were destroyed in many parts of Europe.

So, once again, the issue of VISUAL ART became a source of controversy, driving a wedge deeper between some traditions of Protestantism and the Catholic view.

And the classic Catholic view can be summed up in a quote from a Catholic historian:

Since ALL nature has been redeemed,
ALL nature can legitimately be used
to attain to the world of the Spirit.

UNSOLICITED SPIRITUAL THOUGHT FOR THE WEEK:

“Because those who rule
serve those over whom they rule,
they do indeed rule...
not by their greed for domination
but by their function of giving,
not by lording it in pride
but by caring in mercy.”

St. Augustine
“The City of God”, 19:14

And that’s the way it is, a day like all days, filled with those events that alter and illuminate our time...

and YOU ARE THERE!!

Have a good weekend,
and best wishes for a great 2nd Semester.
You’re all in my prayers.

Woodie