

**HAPPY EPIPHANY**  
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*A dialogue with a Jesuit and a reflection on human prudence  
and the life of religion*

“A-ha! Eureka! I get it!” This year, let’s all make sure we give the gift of grace when we do our best to love our neighbor. How do we do that?

In many other churches around us last month, folks gathered on January 6 to remember and understand the feast of Epiphany. What’s that about? The word “epiphany” means “manifestation and the dawning.” It is the “showing forth” of the Messiah, of who Jesus really is, to us Gentiles. There are many stories at the beginning of Jesus’ ministry (His first miracles) that were an epiphany (a dawning) on Him and others about who He was and what His ministry would be. In Christian churches, the Epiphany season typically begins with the story of the arrival of the Wise Men. Let’s face it, “they get it” because the birth of Christ as an event dawns on them as they follow the star of the Lord’s leading.

We don’t celebrate Epiphany and it is not part of our New Church liturgy. What role could this idea and celebration have to do with me in the General Church? Nothing, really. The feast of Epiphany is simply about the three Wise men’s adoration which is why they brought the gifts, not about the gifts themselves (although the gifts have significance and prophetic meaning as well), which were all for the good. Is that an “a-ha”? Perhaps not, because we know that “the wise men from the east who came to see the Lord when He was born had a knowledge of correspondences [which] remained with many eastern people even down to the time of the Lord’s advent. That is why a star

went before them, and they brought with them gold, frankincense and myrrh. For the star which went before symbolized knowledge from heaven, inasmuch as stars in the Word symbolize concepts. The gold symbolized celestial good, the frankincense spiritual good, and the myrrh natural good - the three kinds of good from which everything of worship originates" (*De Verbo* 7).

Three types of good! Well, spiritual we are, but in the natural we dwell, so what could worship of the Lord look like with natural good? We know that one of the two great commandments is for us to love our neighbor as ourself. Now, the Writings talk about all sorts of levels of the neighbor—so take your pick! Always make sure, though, that you remember to care for yourself and your family so that you can care for and reach out to others.(cf. *Heavenly Doctrine* 97) This year, in addition to thinking about a resolution, remember that our baptism or confirmation makes us a “new creation” and as such our faith helps us lead a “new life” that follows the Lord’s leading. This ability comes from the Lord’s grace, and it can elevate us from the natural to the spiritual in keeping His truths first in our hearts and minds. Rev. Roger Haight, S.J., in his book *The Experience and Language of Grace*, points out that this raises some striking questions: “Can one really know whether this or that in the concrete is the will of God? and not my will? How does one decide in this particular movement or experience that it is a manifestation of grace and that it is not escapist, involving a surrender of autonomous and solid rational judgment?” Put another way, how do we tap into more of the Lord’s grace when we know we can’t see His hand of providence until afterward? We know the work *The Divine Providence* addresses one aspect of this question by asking us to use our human prudence because “if a person as from his own prudence did not dispose all things pertaining to his function and life he could not be led and

disposed from the Divine Providence; for he would be like one standing with his hands hanging down, his mouth open, his eyes closed and holding his breath, awaiting influx. He would thus divest himself of the human, which he has from the perception and sensation that he lives, thinks, wills, speaks and acts as from himself; and at the same time he would divest himself of his two faculties, liberty and rationality” (*Divine Providence* 210).

God’s Grace as also His providence is general and omnipresent, and it is also particular to each of us. Our lives, and the experiences that comprise them, meet our faith, and when they come together, then we follow our beliefs, our star! Sometimes our experiences and feelings meet head on – as in temptation—and sometimes our experiences fit our understanding of faith like a hand in a glove. We are to use our faith, reason, and knowledge, and this gives us our best opportunity to cooperate and be part of the Lord’s purpose, which is to create a “heaven from the human race.”

Consider this: our lives are the not just the application of doctrine and reason! Our lives are the actual canvass for the Lord’s grace. Rev. Roger Haight S.J., reflecting on the thoughts of William James, states in the same book: “Reason alone cannot uncover all there is to know—theology that proceeds from abstract principles or objective formulae, that is, devoid of concrete experience or subjective life, and that deductively arrives at conclusions that are equally unrelated to human life have no significance for it.” Besides, we know from the Writings that “all religion is of the life and the life of religion is to do good” (*Life* 1). Haight agrees: “the ultimate test of religious value is not how it happens but its fruits, that is, what is attained. If a person is really born anew, this will become manifest in his life” (Haight p.21).

Our lives lived and their good or bad story, are the place to seek, find, and cooperate with God. Is this an epiphany? It sort

of was for me, but at the same time, we know that all things that spiritually exist must materialize on the “ultimate” level here in the natural world of “effects and useful endeavors” (cf. *Divine Love and Wisdom* 303).

So, being a New Churchman is to seek to live a new Christian life, and that is where the Lord’s leading or grace becomes real and actual. This is how the “life of religion” does good. Who is doing the good? We are! Just as the Wise men were led to bring gifts, so too are we to bring the gift of the grace of God, and love of charity and good in particular, to the world around us.

Is this easy? Not always. Evil is real. There is great suffering all around us, and the Lord’s grace and religion itself are in the breach of disdain and neglect every second of every day. Evil and suffering are always the biggest issue for religion because they manifest themselves in the face of the goodness of God and make us all ask: How does one know that God is good, -- given the suffering I experience or see? Rev. Haight further states, “These questions correspond to real existential problems that often exist inside or within a core of faith. The problem is real precisely because of the concrete and actual experience of evil in the world. Evil, suffering, sin and death are realities; they are the causes of doubt to faith and the reasons of atheism; and they are solid reasons constituting the challenge to any doctrine of grace. Grace must be one that is founded on equal experiences of reality” (*op. cit.*). Remember, even after Jesus’ birth, evil arrived to take His life and the family fled to Egypt. Just the same, we are the receiving vessel for the Lord’s love and grace. “Without this reception and reciprocity, [a person] would be like chaff in the wind, and would stand as if lifeless, with mouth open, and hands hanging down, awaiting influx, devoid of thought and action in regard to the things that concern [his/her] salvation. It is indeed true that [he/she] is by no means the agent in regard to these things, but yet [he/she] is a reagent as of [him/herself]”

(*Life* 107). We have to try to reflect His light because “He is the vine and we are the branches,” so we must bear fruit, good fruit that is “worthy of repentance,” as John the baptizer said.

Now, what has come from your experiences and your faith? Put another way, how do we reflect the Lord’s light and love to keep our world warm and bright to combat the things that make it cold and dark? Look for ways that your experience offers to you and follow that star. The star that you follow will include your life as it illuminates the world, just as their stars did for Dr. Martin Luther King and Benazir Bhutto. In your life, the Lord’s will can be done. The Lord’s grace can change your life and reshape your love. Why? “Love consists in this, that its own should be another’s; to feel the joy of another as joy in oneself, that is loving. But to feel one’s own joy in another and not the other’s joy in oneself is not loving; for this is loving self, while the former is loving the neighbor” (*Divine Love and Wisdom* 47). So, indeed may you receive this blessing and my love: “May the grace of our Lord, Jesus Christ be with us all.” Amen.

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