

Solemnity of the Epiphany 6 January

All Nations shall fall prostrate before you O Lord

When I sent out / posted a note about this evenings Mass on Facebook, I attached a link to a beautiful Italian Carol called "Tu scendi dalle stelle" The first verse:

From starry skies descending,
Thou comest, glorious King,
A manger low Thy bed,
In winter's icy sting;

The version I posted is sung by Pavarotti. I have to admit, it is not the Lyrics that come immediately to mind, but the melody, traditionally played on the Zaponga, a large – format Italian bagpipe.

In my days as a student in Rome in the 60s, the shepherds would come down from the Abruzzi mountains and play their pipes, and they were truly a haunting sound you would not forget; that was their way of marking Epiphany, the arrival of the Magi, bringing their gifts to the King of Kings, the Child in the Stable at Bethlehem.

The melody and lyrics of the famous Italian Carol were composed by St Alphonsus Liguori (who founded the Redemptorist Missionary Order) in 1732.

While the Carol continues to be so popular, that Andrea Bocelli, who also sings it said, he was encouraged by his parents to go to Church at Epiphany on the promise, that this Carol would be sung: it used to be sung in Neapolitan and was called "Qanno nascette Ninno (When the Child was born)"

These days the Shepherds are no longer there, and coming down from the mountains. Sadly, that ended in the 70s.

But, the celebration of Epiphany and the custom of children receiving gifts on this day continues in imitation of the Wise Men / the Magi, bringing their gifts to the Lord Jesus in Bethlehem. We don't have the same customs here: in Italy, Epiphany is an extension of Christmas, and the day the gifts are brought.

Here, we had the custom of calling Epiphany "Little Christmas" and while we had Turkey on Christmas Day, we might have Duck at Epiphany, as well as going to Mass, of course.

The idea of bringing gifts to the King is taken up by one spiritual writer in terms of what we offer to the Lord Jesus at the beginning of the New Year. I think, as it is a time when we make resolutions, it is a good time to consider our Faith Practice too and what we might do. You may already have made your own decisions on Spiritual matters for the year ahead, but the proposals made by Philip Kosloski in Aleteia, an online Catholic resource, are worth considering.

He thinks of the gifts of the Magi as being used to explain Jesus' Mission as Priest, Prophet and King, which can be interpreted as symbols of charity, prayer and penance in application to our spiritual life.

Philip Kosloski quotes Angelo Cagnola's explanation: he sees the Magi as icons of our vocation to Faith in Jesus, for which we should give thanks today, the Epiphany. I hope to take this further in my reflection for the Baptism of Our Lord on Sunday. But beginning the New Year and giving thanks for our call to Faith in Jesus, let us consider the gifts we bring at this Mass, where Jesus is acknowledged by the Magi who came from afar.

Cagnola suggests we offer to Jesus Christ the gold of charity, the incense of prayer and the myrrh of holy mortification. These are recognised as "pillars" in following the example of Jesus. And, Kosloski offers this prayer which I quote in part of the 20th Century Carmelite Fr Gabriel of St Mary Magdalen:

"O Jesus, I adore you, for you are the Lord My God.

You have shown me that ... you wish that I, too, place before the manger the gifts of the Wise Men:

The incense of prayer,

the myrrh of mortification and of suffering borne with generosity, out of love for you,

and finally, the gold of charity, charity which will make my heart wholly and exclusively Yours"

If we take this Way, it will help us to follow Jesus, wherever he leads.