

# CELEBRATING EPIPHANY

adapted from the writings of Catherine Doherty

We would like to share with you some customs we traditionally celebrate on the feast of Epiphany, the arrival of the Three Kings in Bethlehem, to the delight of our visiting friends. These traditions come from Europe. Epiphany was traditionally celebrated on January 6, and is sometimes called Star Christmas, or Little Christmas. It is one of the oldest Christian feasts, and was originally considered as the day of Christ's birth; it is still celebrated that way by many Eastern Christians.

Epiphany is a word that means 'manifestation,' showing forth, or making visible. It manifests the *divinity* of Christ, the showing forth of God. The event most commonly associated with the feast of Epiphany is that of Christ's being 'made visible' to the Magi, the Wise Men who followed a star to the cave at Bethlehem, to find there the newborn Christ and do him homage. The visit of the Magi is found in the second chapter of the Gospel by Matthew:

*"After Jesus had been born at Bethlehem in Judea during the reign of King Herod, suddenly some wise men came to Jerusalem from the East asking, 'Where is the infant king of the Jews? We saw his star as it rose and have come to do him homage.' When King Herod heard this he was perturbed, and so was the whole of Jerusalem. He called together all the chief priests and the scribes of the people, and enquired of them where the Christ was to be born. They told him, 'At Bethlehem...'*

*The wise men set out, and suddenly the star they had seen rising went forward and halted over the place where the child was. The sight of the star filled them with delight, and going into the house they saw the child with his mother Mary, and falling to their knees*

*they did him homage. Then, opening their treasures, they offered him gifts of gold and frankincense and myrrh...."*

Because of their three gifts for the Christ Child, tradition has it that the Wise Men were three in number, and of kingly origin. So they are often called the Three Kings.

These are three Epiphany customs that we celebrate in our Madonna House communities:



- the blessing of the lintels of the main doors;
- the Epiphany cake or bread with the three hidden coins;
- the distribution of spiritual 'gifts' to each family member and guest, usually done by someone dressed up in a costume that calls to mind the Three Kings.

The first custom, the blessing of the doorway, is usually done just before a meal, while all are gathered around, by the head of the family. A piece of chalk is first blessed with holy water, or simply with the sign of the cross. Then on the door frame above the main door, an inscription is made with the chalk to look something like this:

20 C + M + B 05

The year (here, 2005) is separated with the letters C, M, B, which are interspersed with small crosses. The letters stand for the Latin phrase *Christus Mansionem Benedicat*, "May Christ bless this home," though many people also interpret these letters as the initials of the names of the three Wise Men or Holy Kings, traditionally known as Caspar, Melchior and Balthazar.

God's blessing is then asked upon all who abide in this home and who pass through its doorways. The Holy

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## Pass It On! #19

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**Pass It On!**

#19

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Kings give a blessing each time a person passes through the door. The following prayer may be said:

*O Blessed Trinity — God our Father, Jesus Christ his beloved Son, and the Holy Spirit — hear the intercessions of Blessed Caspar, Melchior and Balthazar, and of all the saints on our behalf. We come before You today to dedicate our home to You. Make it a dwelling place of your mercy and peace. Give to those who pass through the doorways of our home an awareness of your presence within their hearts. Bless their coming in, and their going out. Watch over them, wherever they may journey. Amen.*

The second custom, the Epiphany coffee cake, is usually incorporated into breakfast that day. The cake or bread is round and may be decorated like a king's crown. Hidden inside the cake are three bright shiny coins (which have been washed and boiled in water for five minutes to sanitize them). The coins may be substituted by nuts or whatever one's ingenuity comes up with. As the cake is eaten, three family members or guests will eventually find one of the tokens. Then sometime during the day each of these privileged persons will pray some special prayer for the whole family, perhaps the rosary or simply the Lord's prayer. At Madonna House each of the three persons spends an hour in adoration before the Blessed Sacrament, since adoration is a keynote of the Epiphany feast: the Magi came to adore Christ.

We usually do the third custom at the evening meal. Just after desert has been served, someone (or three persons, if the group is larger) dressed in an imaginative kingly robe comes around the supper table with a tray of spiritual gifts. Ahead of time, a family member has cut colored paper or cardboard into the shape of crowns, stars, camels or whatever imagination suggests. On each card has been written a word or phrase, taken from a list which may include virtues or qualities of soul like the following: joy, peace, patience, cheerfulness, gratitude, perseverance, thoughtfulness, faith, simplicity, faithfulness, hope, generosity, confidence in God. The 'king' lets each person pick out a gift, from the many that are available, but without the person looking to see what is on the card; not trying to choose a particular 'word' for oneself. Throughout the remainder of the year, everyone tries to exercise his or her gift in daily life.

We might mention the symbolism of the gifts brought by the Magi. Gold signifies the kingship of Christ; frankincense (meaning pure incense) signifies Christ's office of high priest; and myrrh signifies his burial (since it was used in embalming at the time of Christ). Christ our king, as high priest offers his sacrificial death for our salvation.

Adapted from: *Donkey Bells* by Catherine Doherty, available through Madonna House Publications.

Catherine Doherty (1896-1985), born in Russia, was foundress of Madonna House and a prolific writer and teacher. Her passionate zeal impelled her to pass on her faith in God. She is now being considered for sainthood by the Catholic Church.