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Glory in Hiddenness

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January 4, 2026: The Epiphany

Readings: Isaiah 60.1-6; Ephesians 3.2-3, 5-6; Matthew 2.1-12

The solemnity of the Epiphany teaches us why God reveals himself, how he does so, and what the proper response to such a revelation should be. “Epiphany (*epiphaneia*)” means “manifestation,” and it refers to how God shows himself, how God appears within history. Historically, this feast has focused on a whole network of principal manifestations: above all, as the Gospel for today has it, the manifestation of the Incarnate Christ to the Magi, but also other key events in Christ’s ministry when his glory was made manifest in public ways, particularly his baptism in the Jordan by John the Baptist (which begins Christ’s public ministry) and the Wedding at Cana (his first public miracle). Epiphany is a solemnity in which we remember that God wants to reveal himself to humanity and that, in the words of *Dei Verbum*, he reveals himself to people so that “He may invite and take them into fellowship with Himself” (*Dei Verbum* 2). The purpose of God’s self-manifestation is to make of us not only servants of God, but friends of God (John 15.15), indeed co-workers with God (1 Cor 3.9) and co-partners with all of humanity (Eph 3.6).

Glory and Hiddenness

We may be tempted to contrast the first reading from *Isaiah* and the Gospel reading from *Matthew*. Although both speak of the nations bringing gifts and homage to God, in the former there is the distinction between darkness and light, hiddenness and manifestation: “darkness covers the earth, and thick clouds cover the peoples; but upon you appears his glory (Hebrew: *kabod*; Greek: *doxa*)” (Isa 60.2). In the latter, on the other hand, there is no direct language of glory, and instead the Christ Child is hidden, and must be sought out (“Where is the newborn king of the Jews?” [Matt 2.2]; “Go and search diligently for the child” [Matt 2.8]). Whereas in *Isaiah* God shows himself and his glory, in the Gospel his manifestation is not immediately evident, but must be “found.”

These two readings, however, are not at odds with one another. What we learn from Christ is that revelation and hiddenness are not opposing principles, but in fact grow proportionally with one another. God shows forth his glory most fully in the darkness and ignominy of the cross (John 12.32), and it is in the hiddenness of Bethlehem that the eternal Logos, the Son of the Father, makes himself available to his own creation. As Paul reminds the Philippians, although Christ was “in the form of God” he manifests himself to us by emptying himself and “taking the form of a servant” (Phil 2.6-7). While we might be tempted to think that glory means the capacity to exercise despotic power over others, or perhaps to induce in others a recognition of their own comparative

unworthiness, Christ teaches quite the reverse: “It shall not be so among you; but whoever would be great among you must be your servant” (Matt 20.26).

We can get a glimpse of the simultaneity of manifestation and hiddenness in inter-personal relationships: the more someone reveals themselves to you, the more you see that there remains an inexhaustible, hidden depth to that person. We recognize the extent to which a person retains a hidden interiority precisely to the extent that they manifest themselves exteriorly. Revelation is always a showing of that which remains hidden. Although “Revelation” means “unveiling (*revelatio, apokalypsis*),” when the veil is lifted, we recognize more hiddenness, not less. The mathematician who has devoted his life to his subject and has uncovered many of its secrets knows far more profoundly the inexhaustibility of the world of numbers than does the school child just beginning his lessons.

We find this paradox of manifestation and hiddenness at every Mass, in the Eucharist. In the Eucharist we have Christ made available to us, indeed shown to us, under the species of bread and wine. This height of self-showing is also a kind of hiding, at least for those who do not know how to perceive divinity as veiled under materiality. Blaise Pascal, the mathematician, philosopher, and devoted Catholic, reflects well on this theme: “Jesus has decided to dwell here in the strangest and the most obscure secret of all, which is the species of the Eucharist. It is this sacrament that St John, in *Revelation*, calls a hidden manna, and I believe that Isaiah saw him [Christ] in this state, for he says in the spirit of prophecy: ‘Truly you are a hidden God.’ (Isa 45.15)” (Pascal, Letter to Charlotte de Roannez). Although God has revealed himself in Christ, and thus beholding the face of the Incarnate Christ is to see the Father (John 14.9), God always remains a “hidden God” even when he unreservedly shows forth his glory.

There are several thematic links between Bethlehem and the Eucharist, between the epiphany we read about in today’s Gospel, and the Blessed Sacrament that we receive: “Bethlehem” in Hebrew literally means “house of bread,” and Christ is placed in a manger, where animals come to eat. But above all, we see the same mode of manifestation: God shows his glory, indeed his might, in hiddenness and powerlessness. God does indeed manifest himself, and today’s solemnity is about light, about Christ enlightening the world, of his demonstration that he is the savior of the world. But this light is not given in such a way so as to blind us, to overwhelm and perhaps stupefy us, but rather to enlighten us, to bring us to share in his light (“in your light do we see light” [Ps 36.9]). The way in which he shows himself is always an invitation to search for him, to seek him out.

The Offering and Receiving of Gifts

God’s self-revelation in Christ has as its goal the restoration and the elevation of the human race. God shows his glory not for his own sake but for ours. All three readings show us how we are to respond to an encounter with the glory of God: to praise his glory (see Eph 1.12). The gifts offered to the Christ Child are not given firstly because he stands in need of them, just as the majesty of God as seen in *Isaiah* admits of no lack that the gifts somehow fulfill. Rather, it is the opposite: we offer gifts to God not because God needs them, but because that is the proper response to glory. It is because we need to offer gifts to achieve the purpose for which we were made. Creatures stand in need of God, and thus are given gifts by God (from existence to the grace of salvation). But our receptivity to the gifts of God lead to us returning gifts to him. The humility of God is so great that he wants his creation not only to stand in awe of his majesty, but also to have the dignity of returning a gift to him. C.S. Lewis expresses this well: “To please God . . . to be a real ingredient in the divine happiness . . . to be loved by God, not merely pitied, but delighted in as an artist delights in his work or a father in a son—it seems impossible, a weight or burden of glory which our thoughts can hardly sustain. But so it is” (CS Lewis, *The Weight of Glory*).

Revelation is a reciprocal process: God shows us his glory, he shows us his own inner life, which is the greatest gift we could receive, and we are then invited and enabled to give our very selves to him in return. We see in *Isaiah* the “wealth of nations” being brought to God, which is fulfilled in the Gospel when the magi from the east follow the “appearance” of the star to the newborn child, and offer him their gifts. The significance of these wise men is that they are from among the nations, from the Gentiles, showing that the promise made to

Abraham has indeed been fulfilled (“by you all the families of the earth shall bless themselves” [Gen 12.3]). As Paul says in today’s second reading, the Gentiles are coheirs and copartners with the People of Israel. This body, composed of Jews and Gentiles alike, offers itself back to God in praise of his glory.

It is again in the Eucharist that we see this reciprocity most clearly. We offer to God the gifts of bread and wine, which are received by him and then, through the ministry of the priest, substantially changed into Christ’s very own body and blood. There, in the Eucharistic sacrifice, we are invited to participate in Christ’s offer of his life to the Father on the cross. Christ invites us into this self-offering at every Mass. As Saint Augustine says: “And [Christ] wanted the sacrifice offered by the Church to be the daily sacrament of his sacrifice, in which the Church, since it is the body of which he is the head, learns to offer its very self through him” (*City of God*, X.20). This exchange of gifts is the circuit of revelation that we celebrate at Epiphany. God’s glory makes of those who behold it, who seek it out, partners not only with one another, but also partners with God in a great exchange of gifts.

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For Further Reading

Pope Benedict XVI, [Jesus of Nazareth: The Infancy Narratives](#)

John Henry Newman, [The Season of Epiphany](#)

Thomas Aquinas, “[The Manifestation of the Newly Born Christ](#)”

In Short . . .

- *The Solemnity of Epiphany concerns the public manifestation of God’s own inner life, and this Revelation is for the purpose of bringing creation into communion with God.*
- *Revelation is not opposed to hiddenness. God’s glory is seen in his lowliness in the manger in Bethlehem and in his Eucharistic presence under the species of bread and wine. This hiddenness is an invitation to search for him, to seek him out.*
- *The gifts given by the Magi are representative of the appropriate response to God’s glory. This glory enables us to offer our very selves back to God, which we are invited to do at every Mass.*