

Epiphany + Matthew 2:1-12 + 5 January 2025

Each year when Epiphany comes around, my mind is often taken back to a pilgrimage I made back in 2005, when I was blessed to attend a “World Youth Day” in Germany. The destination of our pilgrimage was the magnificent Gothic Cathedral in Cologne, which was begun in 1248 and completed only in 1880. Behind the main altar pilgrims will find a gold sarcophagus, said to contain the relics of the Magi. As every pilgrimage should have particular intention, the theme of World Youth Day that year was fittingly taken from the words of the Magi our Gospel today, in Matthew 2:2: *Venimus Adorare Eum, We have come to adore Him*. Just as the Magi brought the infant Christ 3 gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh, there are 3 gifts from the pilgrimage that the Lord gave me that in fact all of us already share, if we are aware of them and receive them into our hearts.

First, the gift of penance and perseverance. We don’t know exactly where the Magi came from, but tradition tells us it was from the “East”; perhaps Persia. So let’s say the Magi came from Babylon. Google tells us that the distance from Babylon to Jerusalem is 1,678 miles. That’s a long way by foot, or by camel! It could not have been an easy journey to an unknown city, to see an unknown King, guided only by a mysterious star. Our journey to Cologne was not an easy one either. We slept on a gym floor and outside in a giant field. We ate mystery meats out of a tube or a can. One day, we didn’t have any food at all, save a few sticks of gum that we divided among our group of 10 or so. We contended with crowds everywhere we went. By the end, everyone in my group was sick.

So was this penance worth it? Absolutely! It was these and other penances that made this pilgrimage what it was; not a vacation—something we did for ourselves, but rather a true pilgrimage—something that we did for the Lord. And that is why perhaps I remember it more than pretty much any other trip I have been on. It was also because of these penances that our group of pilgrims bonded so well, that we got as close to the Pope as any pilgrim could get, and I began to move toward the seminary. More on that in a moment.

These days, penance is often seen as something “medieval,” meaning bad or unenlightened. But in Christian tradition, penance is actually something liberating. Think of the Sacrament of Penance. Now I know it’s not fun to not only admit our sins, but then have to say them out loud to someone else! But when we receive the Sacrament, what do we receive? No judgement, no condemnation, only mercy. And a second chance. Yes, we then receive a formal “penance,” which these days are typically not difficult. But this penance is meant to help the conversion process to be complete: to make amends, to help effect change, and above all, to set us free to go and sin no more.

The 2nd gift of my pilgrimage was really seeing the worldwide community of faith that is the Catholic (meaning “universal”) Church. My favorite part of the pilgrimage was not actually the main event, but rather the initial “days in the diocese.” We were assigned to a little parish of Herz Jesu (Heart of Jesus) in the village of Diez in the Diocese of Limburg. We

lived with parish families who opened their doors to us, complete strangers, for a few days. They shared their food with us, sang for us, and took us on excursions in their village. We prayed with them, ate with them, laughed with them. Most Germans speak at least a little English, so there wasn't much of a language barrier. When these few days came to an end, there were many tears shed. Our hosts could not have been more welcoming to us.

So what brought us together? In their welcome letter, our hosts wrote to us, *'although we are strangers to one another, we have different languages, different cultures and we come from different countries, we all share the same faith in the same God, and in His Son, Jesus Christ. We are all members of the Catholic Church and that brings us together!'* Even though most of us here have Germanic ancestry, we still cannot forget that our two countries were at war with each other only some 80 years ago. So our experience on pilgrimage proved that Jesus Christ truly is the Prince of Peace! Only He has the power to reconcile sworn enemies, and to bring forgiveness and healing of past wounds, if we let Him.

In a similar way, the 3rd gift that the pilgrimage gave me was a new appreciation for the gift of the Holy Mass. During our time in Germany, Mass was said in various combinations of Latin, German, English, French, Spanish, Italian, and so on. But it didn't really matter what the language was. We knew what was going on. We knew that bread and wine became the body and blood of Christ at the Words of Jesus spoken by the Priest or Bishop or Pope. And that Jesus present in the Holy Eucharist wasn't just there for us Americans or our German hosts. I recall seeing pilgrim flags from places like Siam, Qatar, Guatemala, and Slovakia, just to name a few. We all worshipped the same Lord at the same Mass, receiving the same Eucharist. This universality is found nowhere else but in the one Catholic Church.

There were roughly 1 million pilgrims present for the closing evening adoration and outdoor Mass the next day with Pope Benedict XVI. It was a beautiful sight, much like the vision of the Prophet Isaiah in our 1st reading today, where all the Nations come to praise the Lord. And there was peace. There was adoration of the Blessed Sacrament. There was communion. Just like the Magi so long ago, we came from every corner of the planet to worship Him. Where else could you bring so many people together from so many walks of life and have peace? Again, this is something only the Prince of Peace can bring about.

I went on that pilgrimage with the specific intention of discovering what my vocation in life was. I didn't really receive an immediate answer at the time, but these 3 gifts went a long way in pointing out a direction. Just like the Magi, we pilgrims departed for our own countries differently from how we came. I entered the Seminary a year later. So these days as we are thanking others for the gifts we have received this Christmas, let's not forget to thank the Lord for all that He has given us. Most especially the gifts of penance, of the Catholic Church, and the Holy Mass. And let's not forget that these gifts are given to us to strengthen us for the journey; that we are all pilgrims, walking together and needing each other, on the way to our true homeland in Heaven.