

CHAPTER XVI

The Three Magi Kings of the Orient Come and Adore the Incarnate Word in Bethlehem.

552. The three Magi Kings, who came to find the infant God after his birth, were natives of Persia, Arabia and Saba (Ps. 71:10), countries to the east of Palestine. Their coming was prophesied especially by David, and before him by Balaam, who having been hired by Balac, king of the Moabites, to curse the Israelites, blessed them instead (Num. 23:8ff.; 20ff.; 24:5ff.). In this blessing Balaam said he would see Christ the King, though not then, and would behold Him, though not near (Ib. 17), for he did not see Him with his own eyes but through the Magi, his descendants many centuries after. He said also a star would rise out of Jacob (Ib.), which was Christ, who arose to reign forever in the house of Jacob (Lk. 1:32).

553. These three Kings were well versed in the natural sciences and well read in the Scriptures of the people of God, and because of their learning they were called Magi. By their knowledge of Scripture, and by conferring with some of the Jews, they were imbued with a belief in the coming of the Messiah expected by that people; moreover, they were upright men, truthful and highly just in the government of their countries. Since their dominions were not so extended as those of our times they governed them easily, and personally administered justice as wise and prudent sovereigns. This is the true office of kings, and therefore the Holy Ghost says He holds their hearts in his hands in order to direct them like irrigated waters to the fulfillment of his holy will (Prov. 21:1). They were also of noble and magnanimous disposition, free from avarice and covetousness which so oppress, debase and belittle the spirits of princes. Because these Magi governed adjoining countries and lived not far from each other they were mutual friends and shared with each other the virtues and knowledge which they had acquired, consulting each other in the more important events of their reigns. In all things they communicated with each other as most faithful friends.

554. I have already mentioned in chapter XI, number 492, that in the same night in which the incarnate Word was born the three Kings were informed of his Nativity by the ministry of the holy Angels. It happened in the following manner: One of the Guardian Angels of our Queen, of a higher order than the Guardian Angels of the three Kings, was sent from the cave of the Nativity. By his superior faculties he enlightened the three Guardian Angels of the Kings, informing them at the same time of the will and command of the Lord that each of them manifest to his charge the mystery of the Incarnation and birth of Christ our Redeemer. In the same hour each of the three Angels spoke in dreams to the Wise Man under his care. This is the usual course of angelic revelations when the Lord communicates with souls through the angels. This enlightenment of the Kings concerning the mysteries of the Incarnation was very copious and clear. They were informed that the King of the Jews was born, true God and true man; that He was the Messiah and Savior who was expected; that He was the One who was promised in the Scriptures and prophecies (Gen. 3:15; 28:14; II Kg. 7:13; Is. 9:6; Jer. 23:5; Ez. 34:23; etc.); and that they themselves, the three Kings, were singled out by the Lord to seek the star which Balaam had foretold. Each one of the three Kings was also made aware that the same revelation was being given to the other two in the same way, and that it was not a favor or miracle which should remain unused, but rather they were expected to cooperate with the divine light and execute what it pointed out. They were inspired and inflamed with a great love and desire to know God made man, to adore Him as their Creator and Redeemer, and to serve Him with most perfect devotion. In all this they were greatly assisted by the distinguished moral virtues which

they had acquired, for because of them they were excellently disposed for the operation of the divine enlightenment.

555. After receiving these heavenly revelations in their sleep, the three Kings awoke at the same hour of the night, and prostrating themselves on the ground and humbling themselves to the dust they adored in spirit the immutable being of God. They exalted his infinite mercy and goodness for having sent the divine Word to assume flesh of a Virgin (Is. 7:14) in order to redeem the world and give eternal salvation to men (Is. 35:4). Then all three of them, governed by an impulse of the same Spirit, resolved to depart without delay for Judea in search of the divine Child in order to adore Him. The three Kings prepared gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh in equal quantities, being guided by the same mysterious impulse, and without having conferred with each other concerning their undertaking the three of them arrived at the same resolve and the same plan of executing it. In order to set out immediately they procured on the same day the necessary camels and provisions, together with a number of servants for the journey. Without heeding the commotion caused among their people, or considering that they were to travel in foreign regions, or caring for any outward show of authority, without ascertaining particulars of the place where they were to go, or gathering information for identifying the Child, they at once resolved with fervent zeal and ardent love to depart in order to seek the newborn King.

556. At the same time the holy Angel who was sent from Bethlehem to the Kings formed out of the material air a most resplendent star, although not so large as those of the firmament, for it was not to ascend higher than was necessary for the purpose of its formation. It took its course through the atmospheric regions in order to guide and direct the holy Kings to the cave where the Child awaited them. Its splendor was of a different kind from that of the sun and the other stars; with its most beautiful light it illumined the night like a brilliant torch, and it mingled its own most active brilliancy with that of the sun by day. Upon coming out of their palaces each one of the Kings saw this new star (Mt. 2:2), though each from a different standpoint because it was only one star and was placed at such distance and height so it could be seen by each one at the same time. Since the three of them followed the guidance of this miraculous star they soon met. Thereupon it immediately approached them much more closely, descending through a multitude of degrees of the aerial region and rejoicing them by shedding its refulgence over them at closer range. They began to confer among themselves concerning the revelation they had received and about their plans, finding them to be identical. They were more and more inflamed with devotion and with the pious desire of adoring the newborn God, and broke out in praise and admiration at the inscrutable works and mysteries of the Almighty.

557. The Magi pursued their journey under the guidance of the star without losing sight of it until they arrived in Jerusalem. Thus, because this city was the capital and metropolis of the Jews, they suspected this was the birthplace of their legitimate and true King. They entered into the city and openly inquired after Him, saying (Ib.): *Where is He that is born King of the Jews? For we have seen his star in the East which manifested his birth, and are come to see and adore Him.* Their inquiry came to the ears of Herod, who at that time reigned (though unjustly) in Judea and lived in Jerusalem. The iniquitous king was startled upon hearing that another more legitimate claimant to the throne had been born, and was much disturbed and scandalized (Ib. 3).^{*} With him the whole city was agitated, some of the people out of flattery to the king and others because of the fear of disturbance. Immediately, as St. Matthew relates, Herod called

^{*} cf. also Mt. 11:6 [Ed.]

together a meeting of the principal priests and scribes in order to ask them where Christ was to be born according to the prophecies and Holy Scriptures. They answered that according to the prophecy of one of them, who was Micheas (Mich. 5:2), He was to be born in Bethlehem, since it was written by him that from thence the Ruler who was to govern the people of Israel was to arise.

558. Thus informed of the birthplace of the new King of Israel, and maliciously meditating from that moment to destroy Him, Herod dismissed the priests. Then he secretly called the Magi in order to learn of them at what time they had seen the star as harbinger of his birth (Mt. 2:7). And since they with sincerity manifested it to him, he sent them to Bethlehem, saying to them with cunning malice (Ib. 8): *Go and diligently inquire after the Child, and when you have found Him, bring me word again, that I also may come to recognize and adore Him.* The Magi departed, leaving the hypocritical king ill at ease and in great consternation at such indisputable signs of the coming of the legitimate King of Israel into the world. Although he could have eased his mind in regard to his sovereignty by the thought that a recently born infant could not be enthroned so very soon, yet human prosperity is so unstable and deceitful that it can be overthrown even by an infant, or the mere hint of a threat, though it be ever so distant. Thus can even an imagined uncertainty destroy all the comfort and pleasure so deceitfully proffered to its possessors.

559. Upon leaving Jerusalem the Magi again found the star (Ib. 9) which at their entrance they had lost from view. By its light they were conducted to Bethlehem and to the cave of the Nativity. Diminishing in size it hovered over the head of the infant Jesus and bathed Him in its light, whereupon the matter of which it had been composed dissolved and disappeared. Our great Queen had already been prepared by the Lord for the coming of the Kings, and when She understood they were approaching the cave She requested St. Joseph not to leave it but to stay at her side. This he did, though the sacred text of the Gospel does not mention it; like many other things passed over in the Gospels this was not necessary for establishing the truth of the mystery. Nevertheless it is certain St. Joseph was present when the Kings adored the infant Jesus. The precaution of sending him away was not necessary, for the Magi had already been instructed that the Mother of the Newborn was a Virgin, and that He was the true God and not a son of St. Joseph; nor would God have permitted them to be led to the cave ignorant of such an important circumstance as his origin, allowing them to adore the Child as the son of Joseph and of a mother not a virgin. Of all this they were enlightened, and they had most exalted sentiments toward such magnificent and lofty sacraments.

560. The heavenly Mother awaited the pious and devout Kings, standing with the Child in her arms. Amid the humble and poor surroundings of the cave, in incomparable modesty and beauty, She exhibited at the same time a majesty more than human, the light of heaven shining in her countenance. Still more visible was this light in the Child, shedding through the cavern effulgent splendor which made it like a heaven. The three eastern Kings entered (Mt. 2:11), and at the first sight of the Son and Mother they were for a considerable time overwhelmed with wonder. They prostrated themselves upon the earth, and in this position they worshiped and adored the Infant, acknowledging Him as true God and true man, and as the Repairer of the human race. By the divine power which the sight of Him and his presence exerted in their souls they were filled with new enlightenment. They perceived the multitude of angelic spirits, who as servants and ministers of the King of kings and Lord of lords attended upon Him in reverential fear (Heb. 1:4; Apoc. 19:16). Rising to the feet they congratulated their and our Queen as Mother of the Son of the eternal Father, and they approached to reverence Her on their knees. They sought her hand in

order to kiss it, as they were accustomed to do to their queens in their countries, but the most prudent Lady withdrew her hand and offered instead that of the Redeemer of the world, saying: "My spirit rejoices in the Lord and my soul blesses and praises Him, because among all nations He has called and chosen thee, so with thine eyes thou canst see and know what many kings and prophets have desired to see, but did not see (Lk. 10:24), namely He who is the eternal Word incarnate and made man. Let us magnify and praise his Name for the sacraments and mysteries wrought among his people; let us kiss the earth which He sanctifies by his royal presence."

561. At these words of most holy Mary the three Kings humbled themselves anew, adoring the infant Jesus. They acknowledged the great blessing of living in the time when the Sun of justice was arising in order to illumine the darkness (Mal. 4:2). Thereupon they spoke to St. Joseph, congratulating him and extolling his good fortune in being chosen as the spouse of the Mother of God, and they expressed wonder and compassion at the great poverty beneath which were hidden the greatest mysteries of heaven and earth. In this conversation they consumed three hours, and then the Kings asked permission of most holy Mary to go to the city in order to seek lodging, since they could find no room for themselves in the cave. Some people had accompanied them, but the Magi alone participated in the light and grace of this visit. The others took notice merely of what passed exteriorly, and witnessed only the destitute and neglected condition of the Mother and her spouse. Though wondering at the strange event, they perceived nothing of its mystery. The Magi took leave and departed, while most holy Mary and Joseph, being again alone with the Child, glorified His Majesty with new canticles of praise because his Name was beginning to be known and adored among the Gentiles (Ps. 85:9). What else the Kings did shall be related in the following chapter.

INSTRUCTION WHICH THE QUEEN OF HEAVEN GAVE ME.

562. My daughter, the events recorded in this chapter contain much for the instruction of kings and princes, and for the other children of the holy Church, in the prompt devotion and humility of the Magi, which men should imitate, and the obdurate wickedness of Herod, which they are to dread, for each reaped the fruit of his works. The Kings reaped the fruit of justice and other virtues which they practiced, while Herod reaped those of ambition and pride by which he had usurped the government, and of other vices into which he cast himself without restriction or moderation. But let this remark, together with the other teachings of the holy Church, suffice for those who live in the world. To thyself thou must apply the doctrine contained in what thou hast written, always remembering that all the perfection of a Christian life must be founded upon the Catholic truths, and in the constant and firm acknowledgment of them as they are taught by the holy faith of the Church. In order to impress them upon thy heart thou must profit from all thou dost read or hear of the divine Scriptures, and of what is contained in the other devout and instructive books concerning the virtues. Thy faith thou must accompany with the practice and abundance of all good works, always hoping in the visitation and coming of the Most High (Titus 2:13).

563. By such a disposition thy soul shall be prepared in the manner I require of thee, for I desire the Almighty to find in thee the sweet readiness to adopt whatever is manifested to thee, and to put into practice without any human respect whatever may be enjoined. I promise thee that if thou carry out my counsel as thou should I shall be thy star and guide along the paths of the Lord, in order for thee to quickly journey to see and enjoy the face of thy God and highest Good in Sion (Ps. 83:8). In this doctrine, and in what happened to the devout Kings of the Orient,

there is contained a most effective means for the salvation of souls, yet this is known to few and heeded by a still smaller number of men. It is this, that the inspirations and enlightenments are usually sent by God to creatures in a certain order. At first some are sent to incite the soul to practice some of the virtues. If the soul corresponds the Most High sends other and greater ones in order to move the soul to greater perfection in virtue, and thus, profiting from previous graces, the soul is disposed for still others, receiving ever greater helps and securing an increase of the favors of the Lord according as it cooperates with them. Thou shalt thereby understand two things: First, how great a damage it is to neglect the exercise of any virtue and not to practice perfection according to the dictates of the divine inspirations; and second, how often God would give great assistance to souls if they would begin to correspond to the smaller ones,* since He is as it were in expectation and hope that they will prepare for his greater ones (Apoc. 3:20), for He desires to deal with the soul according to his just judgments. But because they overlook this orderly manner of proceeding in his invitations He suspends the flow of his divine gifts and refuses to the souls what was intended for them if they had not placed an obstacle, allowing them to fall from one abyss to the other (Ps. 41:8).

564. The Magi and Herod pursued opposite courses. The Magi met the first inspirations and graces by the practice of good works; thus they disposed themselves by many virtues for being called and drawn by divine revelation to the knowledge of the mysteries of the Incarnation, the birth of the incarnate Word, and the Redemption of the human race, and through this to the happiness and perfection of the way of life. But Herod, on the other hand, by his obstinacy and neglect of the helps which God offered him for the practice of virtue, was drawn into the abyss of his measureless pride and ambition. These vices thrust him to the ultimate precipice of cruelty, becoming the first one among men to seek to take away the life of the Redeemer, for this purpose pretending to be kind-hearted and devout, with feigned piety. Unleashing his furious indignation in order to find Him, he took away the lives of the innocent children in order not to be frustrated in his damnable and perverse intentions.

* cf. Lk. 19:17 [Ed.]