

To the members of the Congregation of the Mission throughout the world

My very dear Brothers,

May the peace and joy of Our Lord be with you!

A friend reminded me recently that I had neglected the Magi as I swung the spotlight around the Advent stage. That is surely an unforgivable omission since down through the centuries popular piety has reveled at the presence of these late-arriving gentile visitors.

Matthew tells us that they came from the East, the mysterious land of human origins, of the garden, of the rising sun, of ancient wisdom. Few minor characters in the New Testament have so stimulated the religious imagination. Matthew's gospel provides us with sparse information about their identity, but popular piety has filled in the blanks so richly that we might almost forget that the New Testament tells us almost nothing about them, except that they were "magi," a caste of wise men associated with the interpretation of dreams (a common theme in Matthew). Starting from there, Christian storytellers have supplied countless details. Their number, after ascending as high as twelve, was gradually fixed at three, deduced from the three gifts mentioned in Matthew 2:11. They became kings under the influence of Psalm 72:10, Isaiah 49:7, and Isaiah 60:10. Eventually they received names: Caspar, Balthasar, and Melchior, at least in the Western Church. And of course, each got a camel! In a charming acknowledgement of racial diversity, Balthasar became a black and the others sometimes took on oriental features. Their following a star provoked a whole stream of literature on planetary conjunctions, meteors, comets, even supernovas, though today it seems more likely that Matthew was, here as elsewhere, simply reflecting on the Old Testament, especially Numbers 24:17; he was utterly convinced that all creation, including the stars, conspired to reveal God's purposes in the Messiah. Matthew relates that they offered gold, frankincense and myrrh. In one popular tradition gold came to signify the kingship of Christ, incense his divinity, myrrh his redemptive death. In another tradition, from the moral perspective, they symbolized virtue (tried like gold in the fire), prayer (ascending like incense), and suffering (soothed by myrrh's medicinal qualities).

Is there anyone _ even the most sophisticated intellectual _ who does not love the detailed imagery of Christmas stories like this one and who does not wait for the Magi to arrive at the crib at Epiphany time? Here in Rome the huge crib in St. Peter's

Square merits a second visit on January 6 when these gigantic visitors from the East appear.

One of the wonderful things about the popular devotion surrounding the Magi is that it never veered from Matthew's purpose; in fact, it understood the message of the early verses of his second chapter very well: the Magi came to worship the newborn King. Matthew repeats this message three times (2:2, 2:8, 2:11) precisely so that none of us will miss it.

This Advent, let me propose three challenges that are very evident in the story of the Magi.

1. They came to worship the newborn king. Are we capable of that ourselves? Are we willing to bow down before the Lord and pay him homage? Are we able to make Christ the *absolute center* of our lives, the revelation of God in the flesh? Or do we clutch alien gods as Herod did? These are manifold: power, popularity, security, comfort, only to name a few. Most such gods are reflections of our inner selves. They mirror forth our own desire to be the center of the universe. Unlike Herod, the Magi bowed down before the Lord and worshipped him. They joined Mary and Joseph, the angels, the shepherds, and the stars in proclaiming Christ as the center. I encourage you to bow down before the Lord this Christmas as all of us did when we vowed to give our whole lives to following him as the evangelizer of the poor. I urge you too to bow down before him in the person of the poor, who are _ in a phrase we use so often that it can easily lose its meaning _ "our Lords and Masters."
2. The Magi were searchers. They travelled by night, following a star, moving like pilgrims, struggling through deserts. That is so often the human way. Most of us grope in the darkness through much of our lives. Notice what Matthew tells us of these wise men's search. Even as they arrived at the culmination of their journey and found the king they longed to see, succeeding in spite of the politics and hostility of others, events revealed to them how closely light and darkness, birth and death, joy and sorrow, belief and unbelief are interlocked. Do not these 12 verses recount our own history? It is crucial for us to recognize ourselves as searchers, as did the Magi. Our life is a journey, in which we often travel by night. In fact, the Lord's star is visible for us only when we acknowledge the darkness. Life holds so many unanswered questions, so many unfulfilled desires. It fluctuates between heights and depths, between purity of heart and sin, between love and disillusionment. Being human means to experience our own radical incompleteness. Our hearts find ultimate fulfillment only in God, whom we search for during the entire course of our lives. That is the deepest meaning of the Advent mystery, one that the Magi proclaim to us very clearly.
3. The Magi were not just seeking something for themselves, they came bearing gifts: gold, frankincense, and myrrh. It might be fruitful for each of us to ask

this question during Advent time: what gifts can I offer the Lord at this time in my life? Is there something that I have continually held back and that I can now place before the Lord as I bow down to worship him? Is there a material gift that I can give, like the Magi's gold? Is there prayer time that I can offer more faithfully, like their incense? Is there some ointment that I can apply to the human suffering that surrounds me, like myrrh? Can I stand at the side of refugees, who are more numerous now than at any other time in history, or be a listening ear to the unemployed, whose number never seems to diminish appreciably, or provide food and shelter to those who experience hunger and homelessness and who fall into the ever-widening gap between the rich and the poor on every continent? What gift can I lay before the Lord, or before our Masters the poor, this Christmas?

Reflecting on the Magi, a great modern theologian once wrote: "Let us also stride forward on the heart's adventurous journey toward God! Let us run! Let us forget what lies behind us. The whole future lies open to us. Every possibility of life is still open, because we can still find God, still find more. Human emptiness is overcome in those who run to meet God, the God whose smallest reality is greater than our boldest illusion, the God who is eternal youth...." (Karl Rahner, *The Great Church Year*, [Crossroad: New York, 1994] 105.).

Let us run together, my brothers. The star is always shining for those who know their incompleteness. The pilgrimage always beckons. The Lord is always drawing us on with his promise. This Advent let us set out anew, together, to worship him.

Your brother in St. Vincent,

Robert P. Maloney, C.M.
Superior General