

Today we celebrate the great Feast of the Epiphany, in which we commemorate the visit of the “Magi,” to the Holy Family in Bethlehem. This fascinating and mysterious event really begs the question: who exactly were these Magi and where did they come from? Now Matthew’s Gospel is the *only* Gospel to contain any record of this event and the Gospel is silent on how many Magi there actually were and whether or not they were kings, and yet in our popular Christmas culture we understand the Magi as being “three” Kings and we sing that beautiful hymn “We Three Kings.” So where did this notion of the Magi being “three kings” come from?

Well it was on the basis of the Old Testament, specifically from Books of Psalms and Isaiah, that the tradition arose that the Magi were three kings. And the most famous tradition surrounding the Magi comes from the apocryphal Armenian Gospel of the Infancy from the 6th century which says that the Magi were three Kings from Persia named Melchior, Caspar, and Balthasar.

There is indeed a general consensus among scholars that the Magi “from the East” came from Persia, which is present-day Iran. In the

ancient world, Persia was one of the most advanced civilizations, and at the time of Christ, the word “magi” was a plural form of the singular noun “magus” (from old Persian, Greek, and Latin) and it referred to any member of the priestly caste of ancient Persia who was regarded as having more than human knowledge. In Matthew’s Gospel, the Magi are astrologers and in ancient Persia such men were highly regarded as intellectuals and could be considered the “scientists” of their day. The Magi were men of reason and so that’s why many good English translations of the New Testament, such as the Revised Standard Version (RSV), refer to the Magi as “the Wise Men.”

All in all, in Matthew’s Gospel, these Magi or Wise Men from the East were the first Gentiles, or non-Jews, to recognize the kingship of Christ, Who of course was born to save *all peoples from every race, ethnicity, and nation* without exception from the slavery of sin and death. Indeed, we’re told that when these Wise Men found Christ, they prostrated themselves and did him homage, offering Him their gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

I think it's fitting that in the context of today's Feast of the Epiphany in which we commemorate the visit of the Magi or Wise Men to Christ the King, we briefly consider the relationship between faith and reason. If we listen to the secular culture and allow ourselves to be indoctrinated by the culture, we would think that faith and reason are somehow absolutely incompatible with each other. But as Catholics, we must *firmly and strongly reject* this baseless, popular claim.

Simply put, we *love the gift of reason* in the Catholic Church! Indeed, you don't have to "check your brain at the door" of the Catholic Church in order to enter! As Catholics, we love reason *precisely because it's what makes us human*—God created us with the gift of reason, the gift of our minds, and so He expects and wants us to *use* this great gift! Reason (also known as the intellect or the mind) and free-will are the two basic faculties of the human soul and these two spiritual faculties are *what help to make us human* and therefore distinguish us from all of our pets and all the animals of creation.

So what exactly is reason? Reason is the ability to seek and grasp the truth or the reality of something. So God gave us the gift of reason

so that we might seek and know the truth. In essence, human beings are created for the truth and we seek it with every fiber of our being! In other words, human beings are created for God, Who is Truth Itself, Being Itself. In his masterful encyclical entitled *Fides et Ratio* or “Faith and Reason,” Pope St. John Paul II wrote: “Faith and reason are like two wings on which the human spirit rises to the contemplation of truth; and God has placed in the human heart a desire to know the truth—in a word, to know himself—so that, by knowing and loving God, men and women may also come to the fullness of truth about themselves.”

Throughout Her nearly 2,000 year history, the Catholic Church has championed the use of human reason in seeking and pursuing the truth. Rational inquiry has always been the hallmark of the Catholic theological and intellectual tradition for the 2,000-year history of the Church. This fact is so evident in the Church’s relationship with the natural, empirical sciences. Contrary to popular, false stereotypes and myths, the Catholic Church *loves science and always has!*

Any objective and fair-minded reading of the nearly 2,000 year history of the Catholic Church would conclude that Christ’s Church was

always a strong patron and champion of the natural sciences. In fact, many of the great scientists throughout history who made important discoveries and significant contributions to various fields were devout Catholics in that they were either bishops, priests, monks, or laypeople! This includes St. Albert the Great, Roger Bacon, Bishop Robert Grosseteste, Nicholas Copernicus, Fr. Giovanni Battista Riccioli, Fr. Francesco Maria Grimaldi, Bishop Nicholas Steno, Antoine Lavoisier, Louis Pasteur, Gregor Mendel, Fr. Georges Lemaitre, Fr. Stanley Jaki, Fr. George Coyne, etc. The list goes on and on! The Vatican even has its own astronomical observatory, one of the oldest in the world, headquartered in Italy with another observatory in southeastern AZ.

Anyone who claims that the “Catholic Church hates science” is either lying to you or speaking *purely out of ignorance*. If the Catholic Church truly hated science, we wouldn’t even be teaching it in our Catholic schools, *nor would I be a Catholic, let alone a priest, to be completely honest with you!* The natural empirical sciences are the study of God’s beautiful, visible creation and the more we understand and study creation and the material universe, the more we come to know

and love the Creator and His eternal wisdom and goodness. In fact, my own dad, God rest his soul, who was a medical doctor who specialized in Gastroenterology, which is the study of the digestive system, would always say that the more he observed the anatomy and physiology of the human body, the more he was convinced of the existence of God.

Brothers and sisters, the Magi were Wise Men of reason and science and in following the star, a visible phenomenon of nature, their reason led them to Christ, Who is Truth Incarnate and the Son of the Living God. Commenting on the visit of the Magi to Christ, Pope Benedict XVI said very beautifully, “The Magi set out because of a deep desire which prompted them to leave everything and begin a journey. It was as though they had always been waiting for that star.”

At the end of today’s Gospel we’re told something interesting about the Magi. St. Matthew writes, “And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, *they departed for their country by another way.*” Many of the Church Fathers interpreted this line allegorically to mean that the Magi were fundamentally transformed by their encounter with the Christ child and so they went home completely changed.

Brothers and sisters, as we prepare to worship and receive the same King of Kings the Magi found in Bethlehem over 2,000 years ago, let us ask our loving Savior to strengthen and purify our reason, so that like the Magi, we may always find Christ, *Who is Truth Incarnate*, and be transformed by His saving presence.