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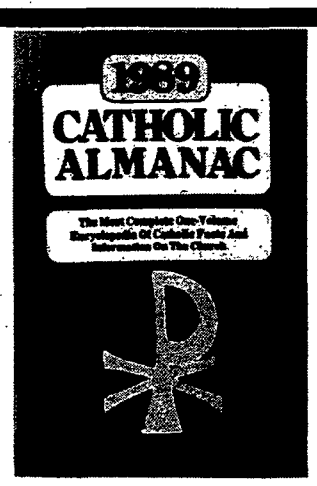

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Columnists

Learning from the lore of the Magi

A Word for Sunday

By Father Albert Shamon

Sunday Readings: (R3) Matthew 2:1-12; (R1) Isaiah 60:1-6; (R2) Ephesians 3:2-3, 5-6.

Sunday is the feast of the Epiphany of the Lord. "Epiphany" comes from two Greek words meaning "to show forth or reveal." Epiphany is the revelation of the birth of the Son of God.

The Gospel has two epiphanies: one to Jewish shepherds, and the other to pagan astrologers. The incidents illustrate God's wonderful consideration and condescension: Jewish shepherds were familiar with angels, so God used an angel to reveal to them the birth of His Son: pagan astrologers knew nothing of angels, but they knew the heavens and the stars in the heavens, so God used a star to reveal to them the birthday of the King.

The Feast of Epiphany celebrates God's manifestation of His Son to the Gentile world in the person of these "astrologers from the East." In Greek, these men are called "Magi" — a learned priestly class in Persia. However since "Magi" is akin to magician and magician has a bad odor in the New Testament, the word is translated as astrologers.

They are said to have come from the East: probably, Persia. It is significant that the only Christian basilica in the Holy Land to survive the invasion of the Persians is the Basilica of the Nativity in Bethlehem. The reason why it alone was spared was because in the basilica was a painting of the visit of the wise men, garbed as Persians.

Tradition speaks of three wise men because three gifts were given. They were probably brother kings: one from Arabia, Gaspar, the youngest, who gave frankincense; one from Persia, Melchior, the oldest, who gave gold; and a middle-aged one, Balthasar, from India, who gave myrrh. Thus all the East and all ages are represented.

What made these students of the stars so great was that they followed their "lights," no matter the cost. And they persisted in their quest even when it meant consulting another king. Appearances meant nothing to them, for the star led to a house and not to a palace. Nor did they come empty-handed. They offered the wares of their trade: the myrrh and frankincense of wizards and the gold their wizardry brought. Then they listened once more to divine inspiration and went back to their own country by another route.

Legend has it that St. Thomas the Apostle, on his way to evangelize India, met the wise men in Persia. They told him about the star, their visit to Herod and the babe; and Thomas in turn filled them in with the life of Jesus. The wise men were elated. They were baptized, returned to Jerusalem to see the other apostles and visit the places made holy by Jesus. Tradition has it that they became bishops, and that they later died and were buried in Jerusalem.

In the fourth century, St. Helena, the mother of Constantine the Great, went to the Holy Land and found the true cross. She brought back the relics of the wise men to Milan. In 1164, when Frederick Barbarossa invaded Italy, his chancellor, Archbishop Reinald van Dassel, took the relics of the wise men and brought them back to Cologne. To house these relics, Nicholas of Verdun, the greatest goldsmith in the Middle Ages, was hired. He built three caskets with gabled roofs, one sitting on the other two. The reliquary is of solid gold —660 pounds, given in honor of the gold given by the wise men to Jesus. So precious a reliquary needed a comparable place to be kept, so the great Cathedral of Cologne was built. There, behind the main altar, the reliquary may be seen today.

Epiphany reveals God's great love for all humankind and invites us to love like Him. Who seeks for heaven alone to save his soul may keep the path, but will not reach the goal; he who walks in love may wander far, yet God will bring him where the blessed are. Who seeks his life will lose it; but who loses his life for others will find it. May we offer love to one another for His sake, saying: "I know that Christ has given us birth/ To brother all others here on earth."

Rebuilding a city of devastation

The Bible Corner

By Cindy Bassett

"There are many who envy your position here, Nehemiah," King Artaxerxes commented as I waited on him at table.

"Yes, I am certain you are right Your Majesty," I said without looking up from my task. I was the king's cupbearer — perhaps the highest office a Hebrew could attain living in a country ruled by foreigners.

"And yet," the king continued, " your face is grave and sullen. Nehemiah, why have you been so unhappy these past few months?"

I hesitated. A servant must never forget his place. But suddenly there I was, telling King Artaxerxes the reason for my great sadness.

"I can never be happy here in Persia while my own people are living in the devastation of Jerusalem. It has been 13 years since they returned there, and still the city walls remain in ruins," I explained. "After all of this time, I was sure that their lives would have been restored."

"There is not much that one person can do alone," King Artaxerxes said kindly.

"I have been praying to my God about it and I feel I must go back to Jerusalem for a time and do what I can," I replied. "Will you grant me permission?"

The king provided me with the necessary documents for my passage that same day. He also sent a supply of timber for the huge project.

When I finally arrived in Jerusalem, I contacted only a few of my friends. We inspected the walls of the city together during the night. In some places, the damage was so extensive that there was nothing left at all.

"This is a hopeless undertaking, Nehemiah," my companions told me. "It would take years of work to restore these walls."

For my part, I was not the least dismayed. I was convinced that this seemingly impossible task was something that God had called me to do. The next day, I called a meeting of all the priests, leaders and city officials.

It is time to put an end to our disgrace," I said. " Together, with God's help, we can restore Jerusalem and rebuild these walls."

The project commenced immediately. Suddenly, everyone in the entire city was eager to help. I appointed work crews headed by each of the leaders of the districts of Jerusalem. Each group was given a different section of the wall to work on.

And now a period of testing began. When God calls us to do something, often there are roadblocks along the way. I think it is God's way of seeing just how much we trust him.

Our foreign neighbors preferred to see Jerusalem as a scene of destruction. When they began hearing about our project, they came to ridicule us as we worked. "You are fools if you think you can ever accomplish this!" they jeered. "Jerusalem will never be rebuilt!"

Despite the insults, the people kept right on working. When Sanballat, a Samaritan, and the other leaders heard that the wall was nearly half-built, they became furious and planned an attack on us.

I armed the workers with swords and spears. Some of them stood guard while the rest of the people continued building. We began working day and night to complete the project. And the most important thing we did was keep on praying.

When we had nearly finished our work, Sanballat sent a message to me and requested a meeting. I knew that he was plotting to kill me, so I ignored him and continued on with the project.

What can one person do alone? Not much by himself. But, with God's help, even the seemingly impossible can be accomplished. After only 52 days of work, the walls of the city had been completely rebuilt.

Everyone in Jerusalem gathered in the town square to hear Ezra, the priest, read God's laws from the huge scroll. When he had finished, the people promised to obey everything. Jerusalem had been destroyed because they had forgotten all about God, who had never failed us. Now God in his great mercy had given us a new beginning.

Scripture reference: Nehemiah, Chapter 1-10.