 **EPIPHANY RETREAT 2019**

Dear members of the

Holy Child family,

Many of us have attended the annual conventions of the CTSA (Catholic Theological Society of America). Each year, the president-elect chooses a theme for the convention and is responsible to organize the entire event. Founded in 1946, the CTSA has had an annual convention each year where theological research, CTSA business, career opportunities, new publications, etc. are shared.

In 2018, Paul Lakeland, president-elect wrote:

*The theme of the 2018 CTSA convention will be “Grace at Work in the World.” To my astonishment, and perhaps yours, “grace” has never been the theme of a CTSA convention, and so—long overdue—its time has come.*

I thought of this as I began to ponder this year’s Epiphany retreat. “We have never had a retreat on the theme of The Story of the Magi.”

So, for the Epiphany retreat of 2019 I am suggesting that we spend our days pondering some of the concepts that emerge as important in the account of these strange fellows . . . from the Scriptural and theological perspectives and see where this takes us . . . today and for the future.

What is offered here is a theological reflection to be used in various ways. Since many of you use these materials with a small group or alone, the usual indications of “leader,” “reader,” etc. are not used. In the past, what was planned for each day was a series of prayer services on a theme. This is a less structured piece with texts, commentary, discussion/reflection questions that connect a theme; it can be enhanced with your choices of music and symbols and mostly enriched with the sharing of insights that come to you.

It is curious that a story, like that of the Magi, with no historical foundation and found in only one Gospel has been the source of much reflection in spirituality; using great imagination, themes such as journey, searching, treasures and gifts and many more can be found. You may well want to go in one of those directions.

After many trials and various drafts, I have chosen to focus on the main elements of the initial question of the wise men, “Where is the infant king of the Jews?” (Jn 2, 2). Thus you will find in these pages suggestions for theological reflection on “The Jewish People: contemporary spiritual ancestors” and “The kingdom of God: the main message of Jesus and its meaning for today.”

The image at the heading of each day’s resources is the first extant depiction of the three kings, found today in the Catacomb of St. Priscilla, Rome.

However you decide to spend reflection time around the feast of the Epiphany, let us be joined in prayer and concern for our church.

Happy Epiphany to all,

Tobie Tondi, SHCJ

**Day 1 — Where is the Infant King of the Jews?**

**Morning**

*Take yourself to a quiet place. Remember that you are in the presence of God.*

*Who do you want to bring to prayer today?*

*What grace would you like to receive today?*

**Prayer —** Macrina Wiederkehr

Creator of the Stars, God of Epiphanies, You are the Great Star.

You have marked my path with light. You have filled my sky with stars,

naming each star, guiding it, until it shines into my heart

awakening me to deeper seeing new revelations and brighter epiphanies.

O infinite Star Giver, I now ask for wisdom and courage to follow these stars

for their names are many and my heart is fearful.

O Creator of the Stars, You have become within me an unending epiphany.

They shine on me wherever I go:

The Star of Hope.

The Star of Mercy and Compassion

The Star of Justice and Peace.

The Star of Tenderness and Love

The Star of Suffering.

The Star of Joy

And every time I feel the shine

I am called to follow it,

to sing it, to live it,

all the way to the cross and beyond.

**Read Matthew 1 and 2**

Only Matthew and Luke give us an infancy narrative. And they are not very similar. Why did Matthew add this story about these mysterious men from a foreign place?

Matthew was writing for a Jewish audience. In addition to starting with a genealogy to trace Jesus’ ancestors from Abraham, David and to Joseph, Matthew has the Magi inquire of Herod about the location of “the king of the Jews.”

**Consider:**

Many themes emerge from this mythical story: journey, gift, anticipation, revelation, fulfillment, the powerful, the lowly, the seeker. What invites my attention?

In the SHCJ, Epiphany is highlighted by a retreat and the renewal of vows – how have you prayed about this event/passage in the past? What have the images found in the story meant to you in years past? What new or different meaning do you find in it today?

Most scholars would call this story a myth, meaning no obvious foundation in history…but myths are used to tell a truth. Matthew, addressing the Jewish community, wanted to affirm Jesus as the long awaited Messiah. What truth does it speak to me personally at this time? What message do I hear for all God’s people?

**Prayer**

In joy and thanksgiving we call to you, Christ Jesus:

may we find hope in your birth.

Christ, be our strength in our struggle for justice;

may oppressed and abused children find hope in your birth.

Be our wisdom in our efforts to further world progress;

may we use our gifts wisely and treat one another justly.

Be our vision of wholeness in search for integration;

may we bind up our own wounds and in our healing

find hope in your birth.

Be our sign of grace in times of despair;

in times of rejection may young people find hope in us and choose life.

You are the Light of the World. Be a light to us;

that we may experience joy in one another’s gifts and find hope in your birth.

O giver of hope, you delight us with the birth of Christ, in whom we find strength, wisdom and grace. Renew our vision during this season that we may reach out to the needs of others in our families, our neighborhoods, our communities, and places of work. In confidence we pray that we may always find hope in your birth. Amen

**Afternoon**

*Be still and know . . .*

**Prayer**

At this noontime hour we thank you for the time you offer us to praise you anew and to grow in knowing, loving and serving you in one another. May all know your gift of peace in the midst of chaos. Grant this through Jesus who promised us peace the world cannot give. Amen.

**Read Isaiah 60 and Micah 5: 2-4** — the two destinations illustrate significant choices

**Commentary:** *Who is this infant king of the Jews?*

The narrative of Epiphany is the story of these two human communities: Jerusalem, with its great pretensions, and Bethlehem, with its modest promises. We can choose a “return to normalcy” in a triumphalist mode, a life of self-sufficiency that contains within it its own seeds of destruction. Or we can choose an alternative that comes in innocence and a hope that confounds our usual pretensions. We can receive life given in vulnerability. It is amazing — the true accent of epiphany — that the wise men do not resist this alternative but go on to the village. Rather than hesitate or resist, they reorganize their wealth and learning, and reorient themselves and their lives around a baby with no credentials.

Bethlehem is nine miles south of Jerusalem. The wise men had a long intellectual history of erudition and a long-term practice of mastery. But they had missed their goal by nine miles. It is mind-boggling to think how the story might have gone had Herod’s interpreters not remembered Micah 2.

Our task is to let the vulnerability of Micah 2 disrupt the self-congratulation of Isaiah 60. Most of us are looking in the wrong place. We are off by nine miles. We are now invited to travel those hard, demanding miles away from self-sufficiency. Epiphany is a good time to take the journey. The way beyond is not about security and prosperity but about vulnerability, neighborliness, generosity, a modest future with spears turned into pruning hooks and swords into plowshares.

The wise men, and the eager nations ready for an alternative, made the trip. It would be ironic if the “outsiders” among us made that move and we who are God’s own people resisted. Imagine a nine-mile trip . . . and a very different way home.

Walter Brueggemann, “Off by Nine Miles” <http://www.laughingbird.net/SermonTexts/JF040.html#Footnote2>

**Evening**

*How did the Spirit lead me to follow the magi today?*

*Do I remember journeys that took me to unplanned destinations and experiences?*

*The story is filled with dilemma and juxtaposition . . .*

*we can even imagine those who came . . .to be wise women!*

**Reflection** — *Wise Women Also Came*

Wise women also came.

The fire burned in their wombs long before they saw the flaming star in the sky.

They walked in shadows, trusting the path would open under the light of the moon.

Wise women also came, seeking no directions, no permission from any king.

They came by their own authority, their own desire, their own longing.

They came in quiet, spreading no rumours, sparking no fears to lead to innocents’ slaughter,

to their sister Rachel’s inconsolable lamentations.

Wise women also came, and they brought useful gifts:

water for labour’s washing, fire for warm illumination, a blanket for swaddling.

Wise women also came, at least three of them,

holding Mary in the labour,

crying out with her in the birth pangs,

breathing ancient blessings into her ear.

Wise women also came, and they went, as wise women always do, home a different way.

Jan L. Richardson from *Night Visions: searching for shadows of advent and christmas*, 1998: United Church Press

**WHAT IS MY HOPE FOR TOMORROW?**

**Day 2 — The Infant King of the JEWS**

**Morning**

*Take yourself to a quiet place. Remember that you are in the presence of God.*

*Whom do you want to bring to prayer today?*

*What grace would you like to receive today?*

**Prayer**

O God of tender mercy, your love for us has drawn you to be one with us in Christ. You are breaking down the barriers between nations by the force of that love in our hearts. Help us always to be persons of peace in union with those who actively build it in society. Grant this through your Christ whose gift is the blessing of peace in the midst of chaos. Amen.

**Today’s Reflection will lead us to think about the Jewish people**

What follows historically in the tradition is a very circuitous, even disastrous road, about Jesus’ mission. The wise men call him “King of the Jews;” but very soon after his death his early followers set out to spread his message to lands beyond where Jesus lived and preached. There are no boundaries to Jesus’ mission and message.

In 70 CE the question arose, *“If I want to be a follower of Jesus but am not Jewish, must I become Jewish first in order to follow him?”* A meeting of community leaders in Jerusalem said, *“No, you do not.”*  We now call this meeting the Council of Jerusalem and note that the very first meeting of its kind opens wide the doors of Jesus’ message about the kingdom of God. At the same time, this meeting, among other events, is seen as leading to the split between Judaism and the followers of Jesus.

**Reflection / Discussion**

Recall historical times when the relationship between Christians and Jewish people was good.

You will remember more clearly, perhaps, times when the relationship between the two groups was disastrous. What are those times? Are some historical? Others contemporary?

Have I ever experienced this antagonism personally?

**Prayer**

Forgive us, God, when we live

our lives within the lines,

when we say this is the shape of our work

this is the boundary of our habitation

these are the limits to our love

these are the lines of our vision

these and none other.

Draw us beyond our patterns into yours;

shifting, moving, curving, spiraling,

many-colored, ever changing,

stretching, pushing,

challenging, renaming,

unsettling, disturbing,

casting forth,

and welcoming home.

Jan Richardson, *Night Visions*

**Afternoon**

*Be still and know . . .*

**An event of great significance**

John XXIII, during the second World War, issued fraudulent documents (baptismal certificates, etc) in order to save Jewish lives from the Nazis. It is John who assured both Jewish leaders and scripture scholars that the subject of Jewish-Christian relations would be on the agenda of Vatican Council II.

**Reflect on the following passages from Vatican II — *Nostra Aetate 4***

. . . Christians and Jews have a common spiritual heritage….

. . . The Church of Christ acknowledges that in God’s plan of salvation the beginning of her faith and election is to be found in the patriarchs, Moses and the prophets . . . The Church cannot forget that she received the revelation of the Old Testament by way of that people with whom God in his inexpressible mercy established the ancient covenant.

God does not take back the gifts he bestowed or the choice he made.

**Imagine this wonderful symbol also found in *Nostra Aetate***

*Nor can she forget*

*that she draws nourishment*

*from that good olive tree onto which*

*the wild olive branches*

*of the Gentiles have been grafted.*

**Take the phrases separately**

—(Christian church) draws nourishment. (present tense)

—No need to go to ancestors.com. Our roots as Catholic Christians are in Judaism. And we continue to be nurtured by it. What do you think this means?

—In the whole of the symbol, Judaism is the good olive tree. What does that mean to you?

—We are wild branches! I will leave this to your own imagination. Do you like being thought of as a ‘wild branch’?

—We have been grafted on to the good olive tree. What other concepts mean something similar? Children by adoption? Cousins not siblings? Marriage commitment? Friendship?

—What ways, personally, have you experienced being nourished by the Jewish community through traditions, friends, holidays, rituals?

—Do you see evidence of mutual nourishment between the two faith communities?

**Prayer**

Lord, Jesus, you are the star inviting all nations to fulness of life.

Give us the wisdom to walk in your light. This we ask in your name. Amen.

**EVENING**

**Reflection**  — from Epiphany homily by Rev. John Forman, 2015

Matthew must have trusted strongly that God could work through vastly different faith traditions, because there they are, in Matthew’s Gospel alone, a group of questionable pagans—not Luke’s shepherds following an angel’s good news — but people well outside the acceptable norms, trusting and searching, until they become the first people other than family to encounter the Christ child. That single challenging plot-point opens the experience of the Epiphany so that it blossoms for us as the feast day of the blessed adventure of every seeker of God, the great excursion of all who respond to God’s first tug at their heart. The feast of Epiphany becomes a celebration of the life-journeys of every person who has found God because God found them first. God, the goal of every spiritual quest — the ocean to which all the rivers of yearning run. Every yearning for salvation, for healing, for justice or mercy. Every yearning for wisdom, for love, for forgiveness. These are yearnings planted in the heart by God who leads all kinds and types of people from a multitude of perspectives, languages and traditions . . .

When the magi came and knelt down, Karl Rahner writes, “they only did what they had in reality always been doing, what they were already doing during their search and journey: they brought before the invisible face of God now made visible the gold of their love, the incense of their reverence and the myrrh of their suffering. ”

Maybe that is why we like to think of them as kings. Maybe we recognize the dignity and the purity of their hearts and actions. Maybe we recognize the majesty of anyone who has poured out their whole heart for a star that has caught their souls. Who has come from some distant place and been granted a new heart—a royal heart—and an adventurous new path home. Maybe that is what is so compelling about the story of the magi that makes us want to call them kings—even to name them, give them homes and backgrounds. Their story is like so many of ours—stories of maturing through challenges.

**DAY 3: The infant KING of the Jews—TIKKUN OLAM**

*Before coming to prayer this morning, listen to or watch morning news; read the headlines in the paper; go to a news website and let the stories, many as they are, each called “breaking news”, dig into your consciousness. Stay with the pictures or quotes that disturb you the most.*

*It is one thing to ponder mythical kings and their journeys, the symbolism of the gifts they offer, the interpretation of the story in the Christian tradition, but eventually we return to our lives. And the reality that surrounds us.*

*We always pray “in context”. The context might be a scripture passage, a life event, a memory, an unreconciled relationship. Each of these, maybe especially, the news of the day, connects the realities of faith and human experience.*

*Spend some time listing terms that you think best describe our world today.*

**Morning**

**Prayer**

At the edges of our borders

you wait,

and at our territorial lines

you linger,

because the place where

we touch

beyond our boundaries

is where you take

your delight.

And when we learn to read

the landscape of our fears,

and when we come to know

the terrain of every sorrow,

then will we turn

our fences into bridges

and our borders

into paths of peace.

Jan Richardson. Night Visions

**Ponder this**

What are we to do with the suffering of migrants and their children? With people who live on the streets? With priests who sexually abuse children? With those who are hungry?

With a political world in ethical chaos?

Returning to our Jewish roots, we learn of a term “tikkun olam.” In Judaism, the term is quite old and it has had different meanings in different times. Since World War II it has been used to mean: ***mending the broken world***. You described that brokenness earlier today in the terms you listed to describe what you gleaned from the news today.

Do you want to add any other terms to describe the broken world of today? Spend quiet time with the brokenness.

**AFTERNOON**

The Magi search for the King of the Jews; throughout his ministry, Jesus teaches about the kingdom / reign of God more than any other theme.

Just as the Magi appear only in the Gospel of Matthew, so, too, is this detailed description of the kingdom found only in Matthew

**Read carefully** — Matthew 25: 31-46

**Consider the following**

Thus the reign of God . . . has a this-worldly, public dimension. To welcome and hope for God’s reign is not an abstraction; it means the expectation of a radical reordering under God’s rule of our world with all that this implies in the way of responsibility for one another, without the exclusion of anyone and with the inclusion of future generations . . . Reshaping the world according to God’s rule . . .

It would be simply inconsistent, knowing that we can act and that the reign of God is made accessible to us, to accept present injustice and oppression as the inevitable and enduring pattern of history, and to expect that in utter discontinuity with the relationships and structures built up in history there would suddenly be a day on which God would restore the divine rule, rewarding each for individual behavior without reference to the social responsibility that is the other side of social empowerment. Monika Hellwig, “Eschatology” in Systematic Theology Vol. II

Even in the 20th century kingdom of darkness and death, we find Tikkun Olam:

What is overwhelming in the tales recounted by (concentration camp) survivors is how small these necessary acts of sustenance seem. These deeds . . . . include symbols of spiritual kinship that prove most important in keeping life alive. Terrence des Pres quotes a marvelous incident capturing this point — the giving of a birthday gift in the concentration camp:

Ilse, who worked on the day shift, came back by noon . . . She turned away from me

so that I could not see what she was doing, and dug into her pocket. “I have brought you

a present!” she announced triumphantly. There on a fresh leaf was one red, slightly mashed, raspberry.” Edward Feld, The Spirit of Renewal: Finding Faith after the Holocaust

**EVENING**

**Reflection**

With each of our breakings You break, and with each

Of our woundings Your own wounds grow deeper.

Yet you hold the pieces together

until we learn to make the new connections,

and you guard each throbbing wound

till we have had enough of pain.

You remind us that it is our delight you seek,

not our suffering.

And you tell us It is not the wounds that give us life,

but the tending of them in each other.

And you say it is not the breaking that makes us whole

but the mending of the pieces that brings us life anew.

We see the signs

but cannot always divine their meanings.

You call us to move forward not always knowing

whether what we grasp in our hands

will prove to be a seed of hope or a thorn in our flesh.

Train our fingers, that what brings life we may with persistence hold,

and that which wastes our souls we may with grace release.

Jan Richardson. Night Visions

**Conclusion**

**gifts: gold, frankinscense, myrrh**

**kings and King and kingdom**

**a broken world**

**tikkun olam**

**one red, slightly mashed, raspberry**

**gifts**