

The Epiphany also has something to offer for our meditation on the immortality of the human soul. Let us recall: you never really die, at least not in the sense that we usually think of death – as some sort of final end. Your mind, your intellect, your consciousness, your soul remains alive even after it departs from your body and your body becomes lifeless. After physical death, you will still be just as much alive as you are right now, you'll just be separated from your body. Retirement is not the "long-term." The true long-term begins at the moment of death. We pass from this world to another. What will the next world be like? It depends. Immediately after death we go and stand before the judgement seat of our Lord. There will be no haggling, no excuses, just truth – the truth about whether or not we have lived for the Lord. This stage of our existence, in this world, is short especially compared to that which is never-ending; nonetheless it is still very important. The tiny part of our existence in this life and this world determines what the next world will be like for us. For those who sacrifice themselves and live for the Lord, for those who die in a state of grace, for the meek and humble of heart, the next stage of their existence will (at least eventually, perhaps after a final purification) be one of uninterrupted glory and happiness. For those who do not, the next and final stage of existence will be a terrible, never-ending misery and dread. Furthermore, at the end of time, at the second coming of Christ, everyone will receive back their body. Those who have really sacrificed themselves for the Lord, learning and following His commands in this life, will receive a glorified body, something greater than can be imagined. Those who have not will then also suffer bodily for all eternity. The human soul is immortal. This current stage of our existence is just a short trial period where we have to choose whether or not to bind ourselves to the Lord.

We return to the question, then, of what would it be like here and now if I took the reality of the immortality of my soul seriously, as if care for that was the most important thing in this life – in fact, the only important thing. We can get yet another key from the Epiphany. Before jumping right to the wise men, though, let us consider something that occurs often in the Gospels. The Gospels often hold up for us a contrast between good and evil. As one example, the Pharisees & Sadducees, as well as the chief priests and scribes, who often chose to oppose our Lord; they chose to make themselves enemies of Christ. The Apostles and other disciples chose to accept Him, follow Him, learn from Him, and to accept His corrections. Undoubtedly the Lord holds up this contrast so that we can see what to do and how to be as well as what not to do and how not to be. At the core of the matter, we can say that His enemies, in effect, exalted the effects, the disorder, of original sin. We too have that disorder. So when the Lord holds up those examples, He does so because we also have built into us the inclination to do the same. Seeing it in our Lord's enemies is meant to make the expressions of that corruption of original sin repulsive so that when we notice it in ourselves, we reject it outright.

The same is true in the Epiphany. Herod is the one acting with very evil intention. Recall that at the time of our Lord, the Romans had conquered Israel. In Roman government, the emperor was the supreme head. However, the emperor would enthrone "kings" to govern various territories within the Roman empire. Herod was appointed by the emperor to be the king of the Jews. However, a true "King of the Jews," as established by God, was supposed to be a Jew and even more specifically, someone in the line of David. Herod was not. In fact, Herod was not even an Israelite; he was an Edomite, which were people descended from Esau. Recall that Isaac (son of Abraham) had two sons (twins) – Jacob and Esau. The Israelites were descended from Jacob and the Edomites from Esau. Herod was on tenuous grounds and he knew it. He was grasping at something he knew was not his to have, and he clung to it with desperation. Herod was so obsessed with his position that he actually had members of his own family, including his wife and his own children, killed when he thought they were a threat. And then of course he was the one who ordered the slaughter of the innocents – all Israelite children aged 3 and under – in an attempt to kill the newborn King of the Jews. Did Herod think about the immortality of his soul? Not even for instant. In all likelihood, no one who reads this has ever gone as far as Herod. Nonetheless, this extreme example of evil opens our eyes to the need to do exactly what we have been talking about – think about the long-term consequences of what we do and don't do, what we are and what we're not; i.e., bring to the fore of our mind the immortality of the human soul. A person doesn't have to go near as far as Herod to have the final stage of their existence be one of never-ending, terrible misery.

But now let us come to the Magi. If my own immortality was always at the fore of my mind – my first and foremost concern day in and day out – what would it be like? The Lord shows us an essential element with the Magi. First of all, who were these Magi? They are from “the East,” the land of the rising sun as Scripture says. They are not Israelites, they are Gentiles from another country. They are often called “wise men,” and so they are. They were philosophers. Even Aristotle, one of the great ancient Greek philosophers, spoke well of the Magi – not these particular ones but of these Magi in general. So they were well regarded, both inside and outside of their own country. They are also called kings because one of the prophecies in the Old Testament said that kings would bring gold and frankincense to the newborn King of Israel. A person might wonder – which is it, king or philosopher? The two were not mutually exclusive. In the ancient world, those who governed were often selected from among the “wise men.” In any event, they were well regarded in their home country, they undoubtedly had a secure, stable, and even rather comfortable life in their own country. From a worldly perspective, they had no reason to go anywhere and, in fact, risked what they had by travelling to Israel to pay homage to this newborn King of the Jews. So why did they go?

Pope Benedict XVI posed this question. Benedict said that the characteristic of the Magi that drove them to the Lord was that they had an *inner unrest*, combined with hope. By an inner unrest he does not mean something like agitation or anxiety or a bad case of nerves. He means something more like an eagerness – I want to see. If there is a big event (say a parade or a show of some sort or something) going on and a child is surrounded by grown-ups, the child might say to their dad: I want to see, I want to see. The child really wants to see so he keeps repeating it until his dad lifts him up so he can see. As another analogy, the inner unrest of the Magi might be likened to a child excited and eager (these are the keywords) about an upcoming trip to an amusement park; they just can’t wait to get there to see and experience all the park has to offer. This was the wise men. They wanted to see. They were not satiated and content with whatever meager worldly things they had. They were not even satisfied with the genuine wisdom that they had. They didn’t sit back and say: well, I have everything I want, I’m comfortable. They *really* wanted to see ultimate truth and goodness. This interior unrest, combined with hope, drove them to the Lord.

Take some time to try to understand, to picture in your mind, the holy interior “unrest” of the Magi that compelled them to undertake this crazy journey, following a star, risking everything. If anyone is concerned about their immortal soul, they will *need* this inner unrest, combined with hope. It is a necessary characteristic. It is like fuel for a car, the thing that makes a car go, and the car will nowhere without it.

If a person looks at themselves honestly, they might say something like: well, no, I don’t really have the eagerness of the Magi to see and experience real truth and goodness; in many ways, I content or pacify myself with the things of this life and this world and really pay very little attention to seeking like the Magi sought. Such an honest assessment, combined with real concern for your immortal soul, is a good start – it’s only a start but getting started, overcoming inertia, is often the hardest step. So what now? Suppose you have started thinking about the immortality of your soul, you’ve become (rightly) concerned about it, and you ask: how do I get the fuel of the Magi? Well, the Lord has to provide it but He’s more than glad to do so; in fact, He eagerly waits for us to open the door so He can pour out upon us the grace we need. But again, I do have a part so what is that? What do I do to “open the door” to the Lord.

One way to answer is simply: the usual means of sanctification – study of the faith, personal prayer, the sacraments, and living the faith in everyday life by following our Lord’s commands and exercising virtue. But to be a bit more tangible, a person will never have the fuel of the Magi if the things of this life and this world is the number one thing occupying their mind day after day, which is a very easy habit to fall into. Unless a person chooses to start occupying their mind with the Lord – thinking of Him in the morning and throughout the day, wondering what it would be like to see Him face-to-face and so on, they will never have the fuel of the Magi. The most fundamental thing to do, then, is to change your habit of thought – not first and foremost the things of this life and this world, but first and foremost the Lord, offering everything to Him, doing everything for Him. This is true and genuine care for your immortal soul.

*God bless you, Fr Kuhn.*