



The Three Wise Men. Detail from mosaic at the Basilica of Sant'Apollinare Nuovo in Ravenna, Italy circa 526 AD. By the so-called "Master of Sant'Apollinare."

THE GOODNESS AND GENTLENESS OF GOD

During the Christmas season, in meditating on the birth of Our Lord, we call to mind one of the great epiphanies or manifestations of God: the revelation of the Incarnation of God to the three wise men from the East. The Greek Fathers will also refer to this epiphany as a “theophany” — which in the root sense of the word means a showing forth or a revelation of God. And in reflecting on this epiphany or theophany of Our Lord to the wise men from the East, I think we can perhaps come to a deeper appreciation of the nature of this manifestation of God if we compare it to some of the other great theophanies of both the Old and New Testaments.

Perhaps the greatest and most important of the theophanies in the Old Testament was the theophany to Moses and the Israelites at Mt. Sinai. On that occasion God revealed Himself in a spectacular display of power, with thunder and lightening, with a thick cloud and great fire, with a great shaking of the earth and with loud trumpet blasts, so that the Israelites were all overcome with fear.

And then if we turn our attention to the New Testament, we also have various examples of some great theophanies: At the time of Our Lord’s Baptism in the Jordan, the heavens were opened and the Spirit descended in the form of a dove and the

Father's voice sounded from heaven: "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased" (Mt. 3:17). And then there is the great theophany at the time of Our Lord's transfiguration to Peter, James and John on Mt. Tabor, where Our Lord's face shone like the sun and "his garments became glistening, intensely white as no fuller on earth could bleach them" (Mk. 9:3).

Now, with these other theophanies in mind, it is very striking to turn to this theophany of Our Lord at the visitation of the Magi. Tradition tells us that these wise men traveled great distances from their countries, and when they finally arrived at their final destination, they came to what was no doubt a very modest house. And when they entered the house they found a young married couple with a little new born baby — the kind of thing one might expect to find in any village in the world at any time in history. And so one might wonder what kind of theophany is this? Or should this even be called a theophany at all? Compared with the other theophanies that we considered there seems to be something essential lacking.

In an attempt to throw some light on this question and to explore the nature of this particular theophany a little further, I would like to make use of a simple comparison — a comparison between a work of man and a work of God. First we will consider the work of man. If we look at the great technological achievements of the modern world, I think we would have to admit that one of the greatest achievements of the last hundred years was the making of the atomic bomb. (We will leave aside the moral aspect of this accomplishment). The first bombs that were made were the fission bombs, like the ones dropped on Japan. They had an explosive force that was equivalent to that of about 20,000 tons of TNT. And from the pictures of Hiroshima and Nagasaki we can get a sense of the destructive power of these bombs. But then in the early 50's the United States developed the first fusion bombs,

which are usually referred to as hydrogen bombs or thermonuclear bombs. These bombs have an exponentially greater destructive force than that of the fission bombs. Their explosive force would be the equivalent of somewhere in the vicinity of 14 million tons of TNT, or, in other words, they are about 700 times more powerful than the atomic bombs that were dropped on Japan. When the first hydrogen bomb was exploded on an island in the Pacific, it caused the island to disappear and created a hole in its place that was 175 ft. deep and a mile in diameter. The fire ball created by the explosion was 3 miles in diameter. One hydrogen bomb is capable of devastating nearly 150 sq. miles by its blast and of subjecting 800 sq. miles to a searing heat. So this is obviously a weapon of terrifying destructive power. The power from the bomb is released by a thermonuclear reaction that replicates what takes place in the sun, and in stars in general, where hydrogen is being transformed into helium, and it is this transformation of hydrogen into helium that results in the release of these tremendous amounts of energy.

Now let us turn our attention to the work of God: We find that in the high temperatures of the sun approximately 657 million tons of hydrogen are converted to 653 million tons of helium every second, and the missing four million tons of mass are discharged as radiant energy. And in order to produce the observed energy which is admitted from the solar surface, the equivalent of approximately one hundred billion hydrogen bombs must be exploding every second in the sun. And this sun of ours is a medium size star with a galaxy that contains between 2 and 3 billion stars; and our galaxy is a fairly small sized galaxy in comparison to the other of billions of additional galaxies in our universe.

Now, I have made this little comparison between a work of man and the work of God, and I mention all these facts and figures, in an attempt to give you

a small glimpse of the terrifying power of God.

And it is with these things in mind that we can see more clearly the nature of the theophany that was given to the Magi. It was perhaps the most stupendous and awe inspiring revelation of God up to that point in salvation history because it revealed as never before the unimaginable and almost unbelievable goodness and gentleness of God. Who would have believed that this God of such terrifying power was at the same time a God of such

goodness and gentleness?

When it comes to the great, spectacular theophanies of the Old and New Testaments, I imagine that the angels are not really impressed at all because they see just how far short of the reality of God's power and majesty these theophanies fall. But when this God reveals Himself as a little baby they fall down in awe and wonder because perhaps even they did not suspect the depth of the power of God's goodness and love. ✠