Notes from Fr. Nick

Epiphany

In ancient times, Jesus’ birth was celebrated on January 6th, and the Eastern Church continues to celebrate Christmas on this date. But early on, the Roman Church moved Jesus’ birthday celebration to December 25th in order to coincide with celebrations of the winter solstice. At first, this allowed Christians to celebrate the birth of Jesus inconspicuously, unobserved by their pagan enemies. Later, it allowed the Church to transform pre-Christian rites into its own feast.

After Christmas was moved back to December, January 6th became known in the West as “Epiphany” which means, in Greek, the manifestation of God. Since then, the feast has heralded Christ’s appearance to the world at large, and is symbolized by the visit of the Magi, who represent people of other cultures. Around much of the world this feast is a national holiday, but since it is often a workday in the United States, our bishops have transferred Epiphany to the previous or following Sunday, so that more people can have the opportunity to celebrate it.

Rather than being considered as the last gasp of Christmas, Epiphany should mark a change of focus in the Christian year. We are not quite ready to observe the beginning of Christ’s public ministry, which will begin next week with Jesus’ baptism. Nevertheless, we should ponder how the significance of Christ’s coming is not limited by any one culture. Every society brings its own history and worldview to their worship of the Son of God.

Sometimes it can be challenging to accept that different people relate to the mystery of salvation in different ways. Many of us have assumed that the dominant European understanding of Christianity is the only way of seeing it. But when our manner of worship rubs against that of another culture, it should be an opportunity for growth, even if it can occasionally feel uncomfortable. The visit of the Magi should remind us that Christ came for all the world.